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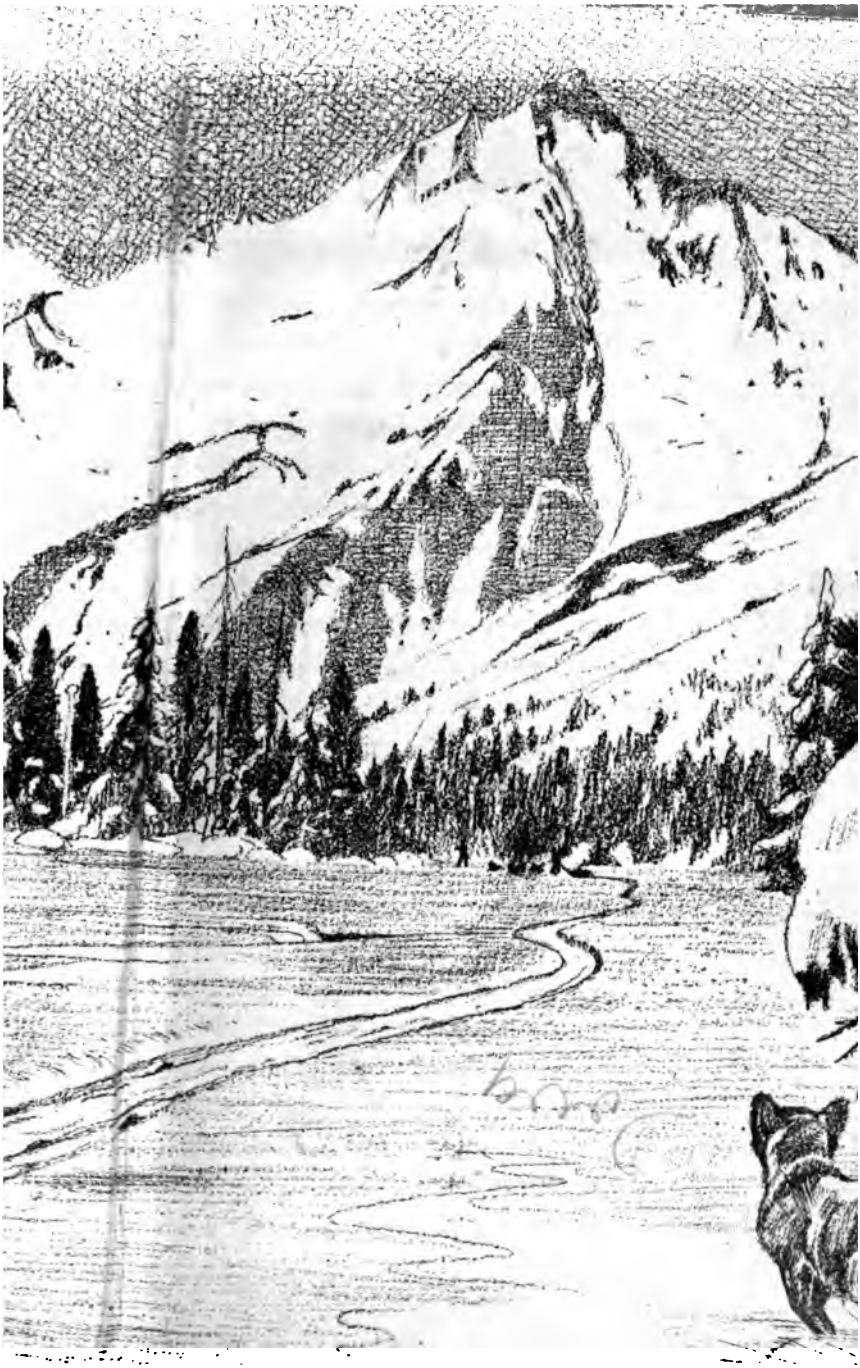

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By Belmore Browne

The Conquest of Mt. McKinley

The Quest of the Golden Valley

The White Blanket

The White Blanket

The Story of an Alaskan Winter

By

Belmore Browne

Author of "The Conquest of Mt. McKinley," "The Quest of the Golden Valley," etc.

With Illustrations from Original Drawings by the Author

G. P. Putnam's Sons
New York and London
The Knickerbocker Press
1917

"THEY ADVANCED INTO A WORLD OF ROCK A

White Blanket

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To

DAN BEARD

FOREWORD

IT has been my good fortune to see many of the least known portions of the Alaskan wilderness. My travels were made for the purpose of exploring and mapping the unknown regions, prospecting for gold, and collecting and painting the wild animals of that wonderful land.

During these wanderings I heard many a true tale of hardship and grim adventure, and these with my own experiences soon formed a large part of the material in my note books. As the stories formed a vital part of the history of the passing of our last frontier, it seemed a shame that they should be forgotten, but I was unable to solve the problem of publishing the disconnected strands until Mr. J. Bishop Putnam suggested that they be woven into a series of books for boys.

With his kindly advice and aid the experiment was made, and the cordial reception that greeted *The Quest of the Golden Valley* has encouraged me to write this story of an Alaskan winter.

BELMORE BROWNE.

NEW YORK
Oct. 16, 1917.

CONTENTS

CHAPTER	PAGE
I.—The Fringe of the Wilderness	1
II.—Over the Frozen Waters	12
III.—Rock and Ice	21
IV.—The End of "Long-Foot's" Trail	39
V.—The Man Who Won	52
VI.—The Meat Trail	68
VII.—Brain against Brawn	83
VIII.—The Trapping Trail	102
IX.—The Hunger Trail	117
X.—Siwash Valley	135
XI.—The Frozen Solitude	152
XII.—Among the Caribou	173
XIII.—Prospector's Luck	191
XIV.—"The Big Break-up"	210
XV.—Running Water	221

CHAPTER PAGE

XVI.—The Last Chance . . . 239

XVII.—Failure 262

XVIII.—"Westward Ho!" 272

XIX.—"Bread upon the Waters" . 285

XX.—The Dead Cottonwood . . 294

XXI.—The End of the Long Trail . 307

ILLUSTRATIONS

PAGE

"They Advanced into a World of Rock and Ice" . . . . . *Frontispiece*

They Saw that there would be No Use for Firearms 56

Once he Stopped and Threw his Head Disdainfully towards his Back Trail . 96

He Moved Stealthily towards the Crest . 170

A Band of White Goats Came to the Cliffs . 308

The White Blanket

CHAPTER I

THE FRINGE OF THE WILDERNESS

DAN DRAPER was standing on a bleak, snow-covered hill, that rose above the little Alaskan settlement of Kanuk. The first sledding-snow had just fallen, and the vast sweep of wilderness that stretched away before him was evenly covered with what the Indians call "the white blanket." To the south a newly broken sled-trail followed the beach that bounded an ice-dotted arm of the sea. Five miles to the eastward the arm ended in a sweep of frozen marshes, where the waters of the Kachiltna River came to rest after a two-hundred-mile journey from the ice-bound mountains of the interior.

Dan had good reason for knowing the Kachiltna

HYPL

River, and in *The Quest of the Golden Valley* we have told how, with but two boys as companions, he had explored the rugged mountains on the Kachiltna headwaters, and had made a gold strike that stirred the prospectors from Kodiak to Ketchikan.

Now while the summer time is the best season in which to prospect for gold, the winter months, when the rushing waters are locked by the frost, are the best for working, or digging out the gold. And so while Dan stood in the snow looking eastward, his mind was full of plans for the coming winter, and of his return to the frozen headwaters of the Kachiltna where his treasure lay guarded by the ice-bound mountains.

Standing on the hill crest with nothing behind him but the white wilderness he made an imposing picture. His powerful frame was covered from his head to his knees with a one-piece garment of light duck, or "ticking," that is known throughout Alaska as a "Parka." Although he wore a warm coon-skin cap his head was also protected by the hood of the parka, which, being edged with wolverine fur, formed a circle about his face through which his breath arose like steam on the frosty air.

His legs were covered by strong canvas trousers that were laced inside of the leather tops of a pair of rubber "Shoe-paks." His outer clothing, in addition to being light and practically wind-proof, was chosen for its snow-shedding properties, and as the warmest wool covered his body from head to foot his costume was as close to cold- and snow-proof, as the ingenuity of man could make it.

But although Dan was dressed in the regulation Alaskan winter costume, he was soon reminded that exercise is the only sure defence against extreme cold, and he was forced to stamp his feet and swing his arms vigorously to drive out the bite of the frost. His cold vigil was almost at an end, however, for he soon heard the silvery jingle of dog-bells among the spruce groves below him, and as he half-ran and half-slid to the foot of the hill, a dog-team swept into the open and drew up beside him.

Astride the sled were two young men who gave Dan a boisterous greeting. George Draper, the smaller of the two was Dan's nephew, but despite his small stature he bore the stamp of a natural leader. His companion, Fred Morgan, promised to be a giant in physical strength, but there was an undefinable power in George's face—a reflection

of the heritage of leadership possessed by his sea-faring ancestors—that was lacking in Fred's strong and good-natured countenance. But however they might differ in appearance, they were alike in the fact that they were developed far beyond their age in strength and efficiency.

A few years before Fred had been a homeless waif in a Washington lumber camp, and George had been a raw country boy in the Connecticut hills. When fate had entrusted them to Dan's care he had begun their education by developing their bodies, and as their strength increased he taught them how to use it to the best advantage. Where a question of discipline was concerned he was as immovable as a rock and one of his favourite sayings was: "You'll never be able to enforce an order until you have learned to obey." Their code of honour consisted of the Golden Rule, hammered home with the full weight of Dan's strong arm, and when they had begun to show signs of improvement he had shown his confidence in them by taking them into the Alaskan wilderness.

In return for his trouble the boys regarded him with an admiration that bordered on idolatry. It was a matter of common belief among the towns-

people that the boys would risk their lives in obeying any order that Dan might give them. A burly prospector from the Iliamna country voiced the feeling of the settlement when he said, "I'd as soon tackle a she grizzly with cubs as to cross Dan Draper and them two kids of his!"

It was not strange, then, that Dan watched them critically as they swept across the clearing, or that his eyes shone with delight as the powerful dogs came to a halt beside him, but as usual, he tried to hide his fondness for the boys under a gruff exterior.

"How did you make out at the Indian village?" were his first words.

"Fine! We came home in an hour, flat—that's eight miles!" George cried proudly.

"I'm not worrying about the dogs," Dan answered. "They will be trail-eaters when we get 'em trained down. But how did you settle the dog-food question?"

"We made a big haul. Red Jacket sold us four hundred pounds of dried salmon—cheap too. We stored it in a *cache* alongside the trail, so the malemutes couldn't get at it."

"That's mighty good news!" Dan exclaimed

delightedly, and then his face grew serious as he continued, "We'll need every pound that we can get because we've got to separate."

His words came like a thunderbolt out of a clear sky, and for a moment the boys watched him with amazed incredulity.

"Yes, we've got to break separate trails," Dan said emphatically. "But it's a long yarn and I'll start at the beginning." For an instant his keen eyes swept the surrounding hills, and then satisfied that no one was eavesdropping, he began the story.

"You boys have heard of 'Lucky Simpson,' the man who struck it rich on Ptarmigan Creek, but you probably didn't know that he was an old *tillicum*[1] of mine. Well, he went through Kanuk yesterday with the Government mail-carrier on his way to the Kuskokwim diggin's, and I had an hour's talk with him in our cabin. What he told me has changed all our plans, and to come right down to brass tacks, it's this—Simpson thinks that he knows where there's a big free-milling gold deposit, and I'm going to send you two young rascals to locate it."

[1] Chinook for "friend."

Now the one secret longing that the boys held in common was for an opportunity to convince Dan that they could be depended upon in any emergency, but before they could give vent to their delight Dan quieted them with a warning gesture, and continued his exciting story.

"As you know Lucky Simpson has all the claims he can carry, so we can tie to what he says. Three years ago—that was the year before he found gold on Ptarmigan Creek—he was prospecting in an unnamed mess o' mountains seventy miles north of Ptarmigan Creek Camp. He was looking for placer ground, but he had a lot of different kinds of hard luck and he didn't find any, but he found something else that made his eyes open.

"One night when he was camped down in the bed of a deep cañon he noticed a piece of rock that stuck up through the melting snow by his campfire. Without thinking, he picked it up, and then by the light of the flames he saw that it was speckled all over with free gold. It was a piece of what miners call *float*, which means that it had been carried down and dropped there by the water. Now Simpson knew that even if he found the vein that the rock came from he would be unable to

work it, as there was no way of bringing in machinery. After thinking it over he realized that he was up a tree. His grub was gone and he couldn't look for the vein, if he had wanted to, so he put the rock in the hollow of a dead cottonwood that stood alongside his camp, and left it there when he came away. When he got out to the nearest town the prospectors saw that he was down on his luck, and so the report got around that the country was no good—*cultus*—as the Siwashes say.

Now the point of the whole story is this. Simpson has it on good authority that the time is coming when it will be possible to work a free milling vein in the interior. So if you boys can find the place that the rock came from, and if it proves to be a big deposit, we'll have the biggest proposition on the Alaskan map. Now I know enough about prospecting to keep my hopes from running away with me, but we have first chance at a whopping big piece of country that hasn't been touched, if I was young and [illegible]ke you two [illegible] want to have a look [illegible]

As Dan finished [illegible] broke [illegible] hearty laugh, for th[illegible]e in t[illegible] were speechless with [illegible]ll t[illegible]

do was to gasp and pound each other on the back. They were still in a trance as they climbed onto the sled and started the hungry dogs homeward, but little by little their tongues unloosened and they began to belabour Dan with questions.

"How long will we be gone?" "How far will we have to travel?" "Will we be in a good game country?"

These and a dozen other queries followed in rapid succession, until Dan had to cover his ears with his moose-hide mittens. Despite their wild entreaties he kept them there until they stopped talking, and then he opened up a new line of thought by saying: "Can either of you boys tell me where the dead cottonwood tree ought to be?"

For some time the boys pondered with puckered brows.

"I know where Ptarmigan Creek is on the map," Fred said, hesitatingly. "But I never noticed the country north of it—I give it up."

"Hold on Dan! Don't tell us yet, I've got an idea," George cried. "Seventy miles north of Ptarmigan Creek would be about due east from Kanuk, and about two hundred miles inland.

That would bring us out—I see it now—on the Kachiltna headwaters!"

"You've got it, George," Dan answered. "Only you're a mite too far west. Lucky Simpson's country will be on the other side of the Kachiltna divide. No man knows how hard it will be to cross the divide, for no man has tried it, but unless it's a straight cliff you two ought to be able to find a way across."

While they had been talking the time had flown, and they were brought back to the present by finding themselves on the main street—or what might be better described as the main trail—of Kanuk. Although the town was alive with dog-teams, Dan automatically drove his huskies and returned the greetings of passing dog-drivers, while he gave the boys a last word of advice.

"There's one more point I want to explain," he said in a low voice. "The Black Rock boys have signed up to help me work the Golden Valley claims, and if they hear of this trip they'll want to stampede, but if luck is with us and you strike it rich, we'll count 'em in on the deal, so in order to keep 'em happy we'll call this trip of yours a trapping expedition, which it will be anyway, for Simp-

son told me the country is alive with fox and marten.

The Black Rock boys that Dan referred to were three young prospectors named Whitney, Colburn, and Mitchel. During the preceding summer they had been wrecked while steering their boat through Black Rock Cañon, a stretch of wild water on the Kachiltna River. Dan and the boys had rescued them at the risk of their lives, and had ended by giving them work on their claims with the result that they were bound together by a bond of friendship that nothing could sever.

The suddenness of the exciting news had driven every other thought from the boys' minds, but when Dan had finished they promised to follow his advice in everything, and a moment later the dogs drew up before their cabin and they heard Whitney's cheerful voice calling them to supper.

CHAPTER II

OVER THE FROZEN WATERS

THE Black Rock boys were enthusiastic over the new plan, and Colburn, who was an expert trapper, spent all his spare time in instructing the boys in the different methods of outwitting the furry denizens of the wilderness. In the meantime Kanuk was buzzing with excitement over Dan's coming departure, for when gold is discovered in the northland men gather like vultures to a feast. As Kanuk was the nearest settlement to the Kachiltna diggings, it had blossomed into a first-class town in two short months, and Dan Draper, by virtue of his discovery, was regarded as the leading citizen.

Since the river had frozen and the sledding-snow had fallen, several prospecting "outfits" had started towards the Kachiltna headwaters. The boys, in consequence, chafed at every delay, but

Dan was wise in the ways of the trail and he went on calmly about his preparations. When the boys would get too impatient, and speak enviously of the men who had already started, his deep grey eyes would twinkle, and he would say, "Let 'em hurry if they want to, but remember this: When it comes to snow-travel, the more men you have ahead of you breaking trail, the faster you go."

Dan's calmness was, however, the result of his vast experience. He was a past-master in the art of organizing, and when he said that he was ready for the trail it meant that everything in his outfit, from the nose of his lead-dog to the steel-shod brake at the rear of his *Nome* sled was as close to perfection as he could make it. So when the news that Dan Draper's outfit "was pullin' out for the Kachiltna" passed among the cabins, there was not a man in the settlement who would have missed the chance of speeding him on his way.

The town was astir long before dawn, for it knew that Dan and the boys never wasted sunshine. The smoke of many fires began to rise slowly on the cold air and hundreds of sled-dogs, sensing the excitement, broke into a wild chorus of wolf music that echoed among the snow-covered hills. Up at

Palmer's store in the centre of the settlement a crowd soon gathered, for it was there, beside the well-stocked store-houses, that the sleds were loaded for long wilderness journeys.

Dan had been true to his reputation, for by the time that the eastern sky had begun to pale, his preparations were well under way. Even the old "Sour-doughs" in the crowd were impressed by the rapidity and efficiency with which the party worked, for Dan had trained them until each man worked like a cog in a well-oiled machine. Theirs was the enthusiasm and contentment of men who had perfect respect for, and confidence in, their leader.

Their three sleds stood abreast. From the rear braces of each sled ran a strong rope that was fastened to a separate post that was firmly embedded in the frozen ground. In front, harnessed in two pairs with a leader, or five dogs to the team, were the huskies. They were magnificent animals that Dan had chosen with infinite care among the Indian camps during the preceding summer. Well fed and judiciously handled, they had become the envy of the settlement. They well knew that the crowd and bustle meant that they were to take to

the long trail, and the eagerness with which they threw themselves against the walrus-hide tug-lines explained the necessity for the strong hitching posts.

"Look at them leaders!" gasped an envious mail-carrier, who was resting for a day, after a three-hundred-mile trip.

An improvident late-comer, who was short of dogs and unable to buy any, nodded his head sadly. "I'd give Draper a year's grubsteak for the three of 'em."

"They was slab-sided Siwash dogs five months back," said a strongly built prospector who was standing beside him. "A snow-shoe rabbit could have pulled 'em offen their feet, but Dan let 'em eat their heads off and let 'em rest up, and—jest look at 'em now!"

"What kind of a dog is that leader of Draper's team? He don't look like a husky," inquired an over-dressed "Cheechawker" fresh from "the States."

"That's Baldy," the prospector answered, giving the tender-foot a pitying look. "He was a pet dog that Dan brought from down Puget Sound way. Young George put in about two months

breakin' him, and now, while he ain't heavy, he's the fastest dog south o' Nome."

Nothing in the world interests Alaskans more than dogs and dog-driving, and like remarks filled the air until the loading came to an end. Then canvas sled-covers were stretched over the loads, and firmly lashed with window-sash cord, a 30.40 Winchester and a shovel were forced under the lashings of Dan's sled, and they were ready for the trail.

For a minute the party was surrounded with a good-natured crowd of well-wishers, and then the circle fell back as Dan stepped to the rope that held his sled against the frantic pulling of the dogs. George and Fred had taken their places, sitting cross-legged on top of the load; Jack Whitney stood by the lash-rope of the second sled, while Will Mitchel and Ned Colburn were ready by the third. When Dan was satisfied that everything was in order he cast off the restraining rope, and jumped for the foot-rest at the rear of his sled as the dogs plunged forward. The second and third swept through the cheering crowd in clouds of snow, and by the time that the first burst of speed was over and the teams had settled down into their steady

trot, the town of Kanuk was far behind and they were gliding eastward through the snow-hushed woods.

Then began days of gruelling travel, for, once started, the Alaskan "Musher" becomes obsessed with the speed mania that makes him sacrifice everything, but the welfare of his dogs, to the overpowering desire to cover ground. Sixty hard-fought miles carried them through the soft, coastal snows, and as the air grew cold and dry, and the last ounce of fat disappeared from their bodies, they settled down into the rut of ceaseless toil as if they had been born to it.

They crept through Black Rock Cañon on the rim-ice, their dogs cringing from the black water that hissed below; they broke unending miles of trail when the grey snow-clouds swept across the wilderness, and sometimes, when the blizzards lashed down from the north, they huddled in their tent resting for the harder toil to follow.

One day was much like the next, and they had almost lost track of time when they wormed their way through the Kachiltna Cañon, and camped at the foot of the mountains. Ahead of them the saw-tooth ranges on the Kachiltna headwaters

gleamed coldly under the winter sun. It was a bleak and sinister sight, this nameless mass of ice-encrusted peaks, but while George and Fred were struck with awe at the grim immensity of the wilderness that they were to explore, they would have died rather than mention their feelings to Dan.

It promised to be a hard winter. An unusual quantity of snow had already fallen, and in the whole length of the Kachiltna valley they had seen but one moose track—the trail of a travelling bull. Two winters before the valley had been alive with rabbits, but the preceding year the mysterious rabbit sickness, that comes every seventh year, had wiped them out by thousands, and now but an occasional track broke the whiteness of the snow. Although they lost by it, they marvelled at the wisdom of nature, for sometimes they would travel for a mile through thickets of dead willows without seeing a green bush, and they realized that, but for the pestilence that kept the rabbit hordes thinned out, there would be no green thing left in the whole Northland.

Dan in his wisdom had made full allowance for this very condition, and with a plentiful supply of

dog-food lashed on their sleds, they could look forward calmly to the future. Their progress, moreover, had been rapid. They had passed six prospecting outfits since leaving the coast, and from what these men told them, as well as the signs they found, they knew that there was only one more party ahead of them. They often speculated as to which part of the mountains this party was headed for, but as Dan and the boys were the only men who had explored the Kachiltna, they decided that the strangers had no settled plan of campaign. They firmly believed, however, that the party would stop when they reached a sheltered spot, and make a winter camp from which they could prospect the surrounding country when spring came. Their surprise was the greater, therefore, when, on reaching the point in the upper Kachiltna Cañon where Dan was to turn west towards the Golden Valley, they found that the mysterious trail led straight on through the main cañon toward the mountains that stretched like a gigantic wall of ice across the eastern horizon.

Secretly, Dan was relieved by the discovery, for although he was a man of iron nerve there were times when he blamed himself for having encour-

aged the boys to undertake so difficult a task. No one knew better than he what fine stuff they were made of, but no one knew better than he what dangers awaited them, and more than once he was on the point of changing his mind and keeping them under his watchful eye. But the presence of the strangers served to quiet his fears, for he figured that the men, whoever they were, would be able to help the boys if they got into difficulties. Luckily, for his peace of mind, he was unable to look into the future, for if he could have foreseen the tragedies that were to follow the mysterious trail, he would have acted differently.

CHAPTER III

ROCK AND ICE

IT took them two days to make their plans and divide their outfit. While the work was going on, Whitney and Colburn made a trip to the nearest timber and brought up a sled-load of wood, as there was no fuel in that part of the cañon where they were camped. Although Dan supervised the boys' preparations he let them do their own work, and, thanks to his training, they managed the task skilfully. First, the little "Yukon" sleds, that had been carried in separate parts to save room, were assembled, and hitched tandem. Supplying the dogs was a more serious matter, for Dan had use for them all. Baldy, of course, was to go with the boys, for they had taught him to carry a pack and pull a sled, and he was never happy when they were out of his sight. Dan finally sacrificed his wheelers as well, and these with a single dog from each of the other sleds gave them a powerful five-dog team.

The small Yukon sleds were better adapted to rough travel than the big Nome sleds, and having them hitched tandem was an advantage if they got into trouble, as they could instantly cut their load in half by casting off the rear sled. The first sled carried their personal belongings and camp outfit, the second was loaded with food for man and dog.

Firewood was their only worry, for there seemed little hope of finding timber until they had crossed the mountains. To be on the safe side they prepared about fifty pounds of beans, which were put in clean flour sacks as soon as they were cooked. As they froze into a hard mass their was no danger of their spoiling, and by baking a liberal quantity of bread they insured themselves against the discomforts of a woodless camp. As a further precaution, however, they carried a few tightly bound bundles of dry wood, which, if used economically, would last quite a long time in their small sheet-iron stove.

The parting was harder than any of them would admit, for the men who spend their lives in combating hardship and danger learn to keep a firm grip on their feelings. During breakfast, Dan

repeated Lucky Simpson's story, and added every helpful suggestion that he could think of. He upbraided himself a dozen times during the short meal for ever having decided to let the boys go, but his Spartan spirit kept him firm in his purpose.

They separated after a hearty handshake and "Good luck!" all around. "I'll see you in Kanuk when the snow's gone," were Dan's last words as the boys drove their dogs toward the nameless mountains. Before rounding the first bend in the gorge the boys looked back, but Dan and the Black Rock boys had disappeared in the side-cañon, and there was nothing to be seen but the space of trampled snow that marked their camp.

For a long time the boys travelled in a sorrowful silence. The strangers' trail was still sufficiently hard to support their sleds, and Fred, swinging along before the dogs, broke down the surface snow with his long, closely-meshed snow-shoes.

Now that they were alone, the mysterious trail became the predominating interest of their lives—the last thread that tied them to the companionship of man. Instinctively they studied its every turn for clews that might give them information concerning the men who had made it. Taken

singly, the discoveries were of little importance, but any one but a woodsman would have been amazed at the amount of information they gathered.

Among the many things that they found written in the snow was the knowledge that there were three men in the party, and that they varied greatly in size. All three were smokers. They were experienced wilderness travellers, were hunting for gold, and were confident of finding game on the farther side of the mountains. They were worrying about the lack of firewood, and were making every effort to travel rapidly.

Alaskan snow-shoes are built to suit the weight of the wearer, and the boys soon learned to know the strangers by their tracks. The heaviest man, who wore a huge pair of Susitna shoes, they called "Longfoot"; they spoke of the next as "Midway," while the smallest, who wore a short, rounded type of shoe that was strange to them, fell heir to the undignified title of "Shorty." They gleaned these few facts during their first morning, and as time went on the trail became their one topic of conversation, and their searching eyes found many strange signs to ponder over.

At first the trail had beckoned them on in a friendly way, and they looked forward with eager expectancy to the day when they would overhaul their strange benefactors, but as the days passed a subtle change occured in the atmosphere of the tracks. They were no longer friendly. In the beginning the boys could find nothing tangible that could account for their change of feeling, but on the morning of the sixth day after their parting from Dan Draper they made a discovery that filled them with sinister forebodings.

For a week they had advanced into a world of rock and ice. There was nothing to see but grim, snow-covered cliffs, with an occasional white peak showing between the straight walls. On the morning in question Fred had left camp at dawn to break trail. As soon as George could load the sleds, he followed, and he had trotted behind the eager dogs for an hour or more, when, on rounding a bend in the cañon, he saw Fred bending over a confused network of tracks.

"Don't disturb the snow," Fred said, as George brought the dogs to a halt beside him. "Something strange has happened here, and we've got to dope it out."

The first thing that George noticed was that the snow was heavily trampled for some distance beside the trail, and that at intervals there were deep depressions between the smaller tracks. Stepping with the greatest care, lest they destroy some trace that might be of value, the boys circled the trampled area. The Indian dogs took no interest in their strange behaviour, but Baldy knew that something was up, and followed their every movement with his pointed ears cocked forward.

"I thought it was a dog fight at first," George said after a long silence.

"It was a fight all right," Fred answered slowly. "But it was fists—not teeth."

"What's that stain next to the place where the man fell down?" George indicated a yellow spot in the new snow. With the greatest care Fred dusted away the fresh covering, and after a searching glance he got slowly to his feet.

"It's blood," he said shortly.

When they took to the trail again it was with heavy hearts and serious faces. Nothing further happened until the short day was drawing to a close, when they came to a place where the unknown men had spent the night. The remains of

a dead spruce that had fallen from the cliffs explained why the men had stopped, but as there was still light to travel by, George lashed the log on the rear sled and, after an unproductive search of the camp-site, they moved onward. That night a blizzard came roaring down from the high peaks, and for two days they were storm-bound. When it had passed every sign of the trail had vanished. By sounding through the soft snow with a shovel-handle they were able to locate the trail and gain some advantage from its firm foundation, but their labour increased and they travelled more slowly.

After four days of heart-breaking work the cañon walls began to draw apart, and they entered a great amphitheatre in the heart of the mountains. On three sides the walls seemed perpendicular, but two glaciers led upward from the eastern side into a range of high mountains. This was all they noticed at first glance, for their eyes were drawn to some freshly cut trees among a grove of storm-dwarfed spruces that followed the base of the northern cliffs. During the span of a long breath they stood motionless, their eyes fixed on the yellow stumps, and as they moved on again Fred

nodded his head and said, "Fresh cuttings—we've struck their trail again."

Why it was, they never knew, but as they turned the dogs toward the abandoned camp a chill ran up their spines. George attempted to counteract his depression by whistling a tune, but the thin sound echoed weirdly among the grim cliffs and he soon stopped. The strange mood passed, however, as they drew up before the abandoned camp, for all they could see was the usual débris and disorder that men leave behind them when they move on in the wilderness. Instinctively they turned and searched the valley for further signs of life, but all they saw was a silent expanse of snow over which blue shadows were creeping as the sun dropped below the western cliffs. From somewhere, far off among the cliffs, came the cackling of a ptarmigan and the bark of a baffled fox, and then the silence shut down like a great cloak, and they turned to their camp-making.

At first the delight of having a plentiful wood supply occupied their minds, and it was not until George had started an outside fire to cook their dog-food, that they found anything out of the ordinary. To save work he had built his fire in

the same spot that the strangers had used, and as the leaping flames melted the covering of new snow, a few remnants of charred cloth came to view among the ashes of the previous fire. After raking the pieces away from the flames he called Fred, and they gave each piece a searching examination.

"Hummm—!" Fred grunted when he had finished. "Overalls, shirt, socks, and a piece of a sweater. Seems to me they had clothes to burn!"

George had begun to chop boughs for their bed, and for some time he worked in silence. At last the tense look on his face disappeared, and leaning on his axe he said: "Fred, what would make men, travelling through this ice-box of a country, burn up good, warm clothing?"

Fred shook his head hopelessly. "It beats anything I ever heard. I can't understand it."

A second pause followed, but as the camp began to rise, a change came over them both. They had thrown off the spell that the mysterious trail had engendered, and a look of calm determination had come into their eyes. The vague suggestion of some sinister secret that the trail had conveyed to their minds, had been swept away by the

knowledge that there was something definitely wrong with the party that preceded them, and without a trace of apprehension they began to plan for the future.

When the tent was pitched George placed their two rifles just inside the door-flap, where the heat of the stove would not be strong enough to cause the metal to sweat. "There are five loads in each magazine," he began calmly. "And from this time on they stay filled. And what's more those guns have got to stay on the outside of the sled-covers, where we can get at them. If any one is going to burn up our clothes, they'll get a run for their money."

"Same here!" Fred ejaculated, and as they began to prepare their supper they dismissed all worry from their minds and talked cheerfully of the future.

The question as to which of the two glaciers they should cross was a serious matter. Luckily, George had kept a rough chart of their route through the cañon and, using the lid of the kitchen box for a drawing-board, he made a map that gave them a general idea of their location. With this knowledge to start on they decided that, if it was

passable, the right-hand glacier would lead them into Lucky Simpson's country, and with the route decided on they turned to the important work of preparing for their journey over the glacier.

For travel on level snow, there is no snow-shoe made that can equal the long, upturned shoe of the Alaskan Indians, but on steep hillsides its length is a drawback, as the wearer slips backward faster than he can advance. To counteract this defect the boys went to work as soon as their supper was finished. Selecting a straight-grained piece of spruce, they split from it four triangular sections.

When these "rough-locks" had been carefully trimmed down with a sharp knife, they were lashed firmly into place on the underneath side of each shoe. The lashing was done with *Babiche*, or Indian rawhide. Babiche is indispensable in the Northland, as it is used in countless ways, from sewing up a moccasin to mending a snow-shoe or a broken sled. It comes in stiff coils, but after being immersed in warm water it grows soft and pliable. When the work was completed the boys hung their shoes from the ridge-pole, and as the babiche dried, it contracted and hardened until the lashings were as strong as steel.

The following day dawned cold and clear, and long before the sun had reached the deep valley the boys were pushing forward. As the strangers had been held in camp by the same blizzard that had detained the boys, their fresh trail was a great help.

"This is too good to last!" George called back, as he trotted along in front of the dogs.

"It's like taking candy from children!" Fred answered, gaily.

Crossing the level valley the trail bore towards an easy slope that led to the top of the glacier that the boys intended to cross. They expected, at any moment, to see it turn towards the left-hand glacier, and George voiced their conflicting emotions when he said: "I'll be mighty glad when we leave this trail for good, but at the same time it will be a great help to us if it leads across the mountains."

A moment later their interest was aroused by a single snow-shoe track that left the main track and disappeared among the snow-fields that led towards the other glacier.

"'Midway' made it," George called over his shoulder as he trotted past. A hundred yards

farther on they came to the top of a gentle rise and saw that the main trail led over the very pass that they were heading for.

Now no wilderness trail is carelessly made. There is a reason for every twist and turn that a man makes, and the instant that they saw where the trail led, the boys knew that the strangers were headed towards Lucky Simpson's country. Although each of them had secretly feared this very possibility, they both knew that the thought had been in the other's mind, and now, as they stood beside the panting dogs they studied the trail in silence. As George, after a last look, started onward, Fred, whose turn it was to steer the sled with the gee-pole, uttered a word of warning.

"We've got to see them before they see us," he said. "So keep your eyes open."

George grunted an affirmative, for he was leading and could study the tracks before they had been disturbed by the feet of their own dogs.

His watchfulness was soon rewarded by the discovery of a second snow-shoe track that left the main trail, as the first one had done, and disappeared in the direction of the northern glacier.

It, however, differed from the first in one particular —it had been made by one man who had turned aside and then returned over his own tracks.

"It's 'Long-shoe'," George said, when Fred had joined him.

"He went out and came back on the same trail," Fred muttered with a puzzled frown on his snow-tanned face.

"That's what gets *me!*" George answered. "The first trail we passed was 'Midway's' and he hasn't come back. Now there's no other place between us and the top of the range where a man could rejoin the main trail. That means that two men went out and only one man came back, and the missing man is 'Midway'."

"There's a chance that he went back to camp through the bunch of spruce, and that we overlooked his trail," Fred suggested hopefully.

"Maybe so," George answered dubiously, but the possibility gave them little comfort as they breasted the long slope that led to the pass.

As they advanced the travel became more difficult, and they were forced to change places often, for guiding the two sleds, on the rough, snow-covered ice, was killing work. Several times they

saw places in the trail where the strangers had stopped to "blow," but, although they searched carefully, they found no trace of a medium-sized snow-shoe. Twice they encountered small ice-falls that were so steep they were forced to drop their rear sled. This meant that they had to go over the same ground twice, and waste much time, but after six hours of heart-breaking work they came out on the broad back of the glacier. As they threw themselves, panting, on the sled, their eyes could follow the road-like sweep of the ice-river as it swept upward to a narrow pass on the crest of the range.

On through the short afternoon they toiled, and night found them camped on a snow-ledge well up towards the pass. They had swung their tent between the two up-ended sleds, and fastened it down with their freight. While they laboured, the dogs wandered disconsolately about. Baldy, the privileged character, sat in front of the tent door, his head on one side, watching them intently, for in all his experience he had never known his young masters to choose so bleak and unprotected a camp-site.

"Look at Baldy," whispered Fred, who was dig-

ging frozen beans from a sack with his skinning knife. "He thinks this is only a temporary camp."

George grinned broadly. "I don't blame the old dog. He probably figures that we've gone crazy. I wish we could bring him into the tent for the night."

"Me too," Fred answered, as he warmed his hands over their little stove. "That's the pity of turning Baldy into a sled-dog. Now that he is a part of the team we've got to treat him the same as the rest, if we don't the other dogs will kill him."

George scooped up a gold-pan full of snow, and placed it on the stove before answering. "You're right, and the funny part of it is that Baldy knows it too. It was three camps back, I think, when you made a trip for our second sled. I was getting supper, and for an instant I forgot the other dogs and threw Baldy a small piece of bacon-rind. He looked pleased, and wagged his tail but he wouldn't touch it. Mucluk gobbled it up right under his nose. It was just as if the old dog had said, 'Thanks, George, you mean well, but if I accept any special privileges these Indian dogs'll make mince meat of me!"

As the dry, powdery snow of the glacier contained less moisture than the snow of the lowlands they had to wait some time for their tea-water, and Fred took the opportunity of feeding the dogs. Each animal got a dried salmon which disappeared rapidly, bones and all, and when the meal was finished the dogs curled up into round balls of fur beside the tent, as if they had been accustomed to sleeping on glaciers since their puppy-hood.

The boys ate their beans and hard bread in silence, for the hunger of the trail is a close cousin to famine, but when the dishes were put away and they had crawled into their fur sleeping-bags they talked over the events of the day.

"There is one thing that 'gets my goat'," Fred began, after they had tried unsuccessfully to solve the mystery of 'Midway's' disappearance. "And that is that the strangers out-travelled us today."

"I've been thinking of that too," George replied, "and it means just this—they were more anxious than we were to get over the pass. We moved as fast as they did, and the fact that we haven't reached the place where they camped means that they kept it up longer than we did."

For a long time they lay quietly, their minds filled with the riddles they had read on the snow, but before they fell asleep George said drowsily: "Never mind, we'll know what's happened when we find their camp-site in the morning."

CHAPTER IV

THE END OF "LONG-FOOT'S" TRAIL

LUCKILY the night was clear, and just as the sun struck the encircling mountain peaks the boys began their climb through the frozen world. When the pounding of their hearts made them rest, their breath showed like jets of white steam, and their snow-shoes creaked on the dry snow. Their long climb had carried them up to the realm of perpetual ice, where the still cold stabbed like a dagger, but despite the toil and frost they could not ignore the grandeur of their surroundings. So far below them that the groves of dwarfed spruce-trees were reduced to a blue haze, lay the valley that they had left. The depths of the Kachiltna Cañon were hidden, but the jagged peaks that topped its walls stretched westward in an unbroken line. The view was of inestimable value to them, for the headwaters of the Kachiltna lay spread before them like a gigantic relief-map, and with

the knowledge of the country that they had acquired they could see that they had already accomplished the most difficult part of their journey.

They had little time to waste on the beauty of the scene, however, and as soon as they could fill their lungs with air they would whistle to the dogs and return to their hard climb towards the pass.

Just below the final steep pitch that led up to the summit of the range there was a snow-filled basin, and as the boys reached its level floor they saw the circle of trampled snow that marked the strangers' camp. Although their lungs were nearly bursting from the exertions of the climb, they urged the dogs into a trot that soon brought them to the tracks left by their predecessors. Fred stopped outside of the trampled circle and anchored the dogs by driving a shovel deep into the snow between the sled-runners. George had gone on towards what had been the centre of the camp, and when he reached the spot where the tent had stood his weather-tanned face turned grey, and he gasped: "Come here Fred—come here and look!"

In an instant Fred stood beside him, and then his jaw dropped and the same deathly pallor crept into his face as his eyes followed George's outstretched

hand. Before them was a smooth square in the snow that marked the spot where the strangers' tent had stood, but instead of the three familiar depressions that showed where the men had slept, there were now but two.

"One of 'em's gone! Something really happened to Midway!" Fred muttered over and over again, but George's mind was busy with the grim mystery that his keen eyes read in the snow. "See!" he cried, after a moment's pause. "They slept as far apart as they could get. There's more between them than cold air!"

"It may be murder," Fred answered between his clenched teeth, and at the word they both started and searched the surrounding snow-fields. They saw nothing, however, but their tired dogs lying before the sleds, and beyond, the sinister trail leading into the unknown beyond the pass.

George had pumped a cartridge into the barrel of his rifle, but although the action showed that he was ready for any eventuality, his next words were calm.

"It may be murder, and then again it may not. We've got to hold our horses and go slow, because we may catch up to these men any day now. That

trail of theirs is only a day old, and when we overhaul 'em we want to know where we stand."

"What'll we do, George? Wait here and let them get ahead of us," Fred suggested.

"We can't—we've got to keep hiking or our wood will give out," he replied, as he seated himself deliberately on the sled. After a long pause in which they sat with puckered brows, George's face cleared. "To begin with, Fred, the advantage is on our side, for we've had our warning. The two men don't know that we are on their trail, and if we happen to catch up to them they won't know what to do. Even if they should see us a long way off they would have no reason for thinking that we know anything about the man who disappeared. Of course it looks bad, but sometimes the best signs fail, and there may be a simple explanation to the queer business. Our first job is to keep them from knowing that we're behind them, for when we get across the pass we may be able to leave their trail and hit it up for the timber by a different route."

Fred agreed heartily with the plan, and after seeing that his rifle would slide freely from under the sled-lashing, he grasped the gee-pole and drove

the well-rested dogs towards the pass. The trail had frozen hard during the night, and they were able to make much faster time than their predecessors. One hour of steady climbing brought them to the edge of the summit, and after anchoring the dogs, they moved warily forward To have followed the trail would have brought their bodies against the sky, so George led the way to the right where some rocks offered an opportunity of spying out the country ahead without the chance of detection.

"Nothing stirs me up more than coming up to the top of a pass like this. It gives me a kind of tickly feeling up and down my back," George whispered, as with shining eyes they began to crawl carefully towards the top of the rocks.

"It's the same with me," Fred agreed. "It's because you can't see a blamed thing until you get to the top, and then the whole world busts into view."

As the boys were labouring under the added excitement of watching for a possible enemy, it is little wonder that their breath came quickly and that they held their rifles at the ready as they prepared to raise their heads. Being experienced

hunters, they realized that even the top of a man's head can be seen a long way when it moves against the sky, and they took the precaution of removing their hats. Then, raising their heads a hair's breadth at a time, they began to study the country beyond the pass.

The first thing that they saw were some smooth mountains twenty miles to the eastward, and Fred grinned delightedly when George whispered, "We'll find mountain sheep over there!"

Below the mountains a great valley came into view. It was blue with sweeps of forest, and chaotic cañon walls showed here and there. Then followed nearer mountain peaks, that cradled a broad plain of snow over which they would have to travel before reaching the eastern slope of the range. Long parallel lines that ran across the plain told them that it was in reality a great glacier, and that they would have crevasses to contend with. At last, by raising their heads above the rocks, they could follow the course of the strangers' trail until it became lost to view among the distant snow-fields. The most searching examination of the vast expanse disclosed no living thing, and, convinced that their predecessors had

long since passed from view, they made themselves comfortable among the rocks and began to study the outlook.

After a long silence in which they weighed every possible route to the lowlands, George put their verdict into words. "I speak for the glacier, Fred, we might be able to break through one of those side valleys but there's no telling where we'd end up."

"I guess you're right," Fred answered, "but that's the way the strangers' trail leads, and I don't mind saying that I'm getting sick of it."

"Well, once out of the mountains we'll do our own trail-breaking, and by tomorrow night we'll be camped in the timber, with a roaring fire warming the tent, and maybe a snow-shoe-rabbit browning in the oven!"

"Make it moose-meat and I'll go you!" Fred cried, with a grin, and springing to his feet he led the way back to the dogs.

Leading downward from the pass to the glacier was a long, steep slope of hard snow, where a heavily loaded sled, once started, would travel with the speed of the wind. For fear of running over the dogs, they decided to take the sleds down one at a time. First of all they staked out the

dogs with the full length of the tug-line so that they could not fight.

"It's all a down-hill pull from now on, you Huskies!" Fred called to the dogs as he cast off the rear-sled, and the intelligent animals, knowing that they were bound for the lowlands, wagged their tails and broke into a chorus of wolf-howls.

"Well, here's where we *smoke!*" George said, with a grin, as they pulled the lead-sled to the very crest of the slope. They had removed their snow-shoes and lashed them to the top of the sled. Fred was at the gee-pole, and as soon as George had inserted the shovel handle through the rear brace of the sled, for a brake, he gave the word and they were off. At first the sled moved slowly, but as the slope grew steeper it began to leap forward, until they were travelling with the speed of the wind.

Fred, with his feet stretched in front of him, clung desperately to the lash-ropes, and George braked until his muscles cracked, but the sled sped onward a full four hundred yards from the base of the pass before they brought it to a stop.

"Gee—!" was all Fred could say when he had at last gotten the snow and tears out of his eyes.

"Didn't we whoop her up some!" George gasped delightedly. "I'll bet we were going forty miles an hour when we struck the glacier."

"Well, I should smile!" Fred retorted. "After the first jump the snow was so thick and the wind went by so blamed fast, that I thought I'd never breathe again."

For some time they sat on the sled, panting from their exertions, and laughing over their experience, and then they began the long, hard climb towards the top of the pass. The second sled, being heavier, travelled even faster than the first, and when they had recovered their breath they agreed that this kind of coasting was too exciting to become a popular sport.

After the long uphill pull from the sea-coast the dogs welcomed the easy grade, and they frisked along before the sleds when they again took up the trail. The strangers' track led them across the glacier between two yawning crevasses, and here they travelled slowly with a firm grip on the gee-pole, but once across the ice-river, they came to a hard-packed field of snow that had come down from the mountain-wall, and they made fast time. Although the winter sun was not strong, it turned

the snow-fields into a sea of blinding light, and the boys' past experiences with snow-blindness made them don their snow-glasses. Otherwise they enjoyed the sun, for it seemed to temper the savage cold that clung to the high peaks.

They even removed their parkas when they were running beside the sled, but the minute they stopped, the bite of the frost would force them to bundle up, and they discovered what every sourdough knows—that the cold of the northern wilderness cannot be trifled with.

At first the trail led them down over level plains of snow, that, separated by steep slopes, gave to the glacier the appearance of a gigantic white stairway. The formation was an advantage to them, for on reaching the top of each steep slope they could study the trail winding on below them until it disappeared over the next step. The knowledge that they would not stumble unexpectedly over the strangers enabled them to make fast time, and on the third downward step of the ice-river they came to a deserted camp.

"They're only a half-day ahead of us now," George said, as they studied the fresh tracks.

"Something must be the matter with them," Fred suggested, but George shook his head.

"No, they're piking along as tight as they can, but in addition to breaking trail they have to sound for crevasses. Those little holes that we've been seeing alongside the trail show where one of 'em kept sounding with a shovel-handle as he went along. If we had to do the same thing it would take two miles off an hour's travel."

They were about to move on when Fred halted. "Hullo!" he ejaculated. "There's something funny about that track over there; follow it, George, and see what happened."

George instantly placed his snow-shoes in the track Fred had indicated. "It's 'Shorty's' trail," he said, as he followed it some twenty feet to one side. In the meantime Fred had been busy deciphering the tangle of tracks in front of the tent-site.

"'Long-foot' is loading the sled," he said with a puzzled look. "He's doing it alone too! What's 'Shorty' doing?"

George, who had reached the end of 'Shorty's' trail, was also puzzled.

"Why, he's just standing here," he said at last. "He stood still a long time. There's the mark of

a rifle butt in the snow, and—" A look of dawning understanding was in his eyes: "He stood guard over 'Long-foot'!"

For an instant the boys looked at each other across the trampled snow, and nodded, but while they did not speak they travelled from then on with redoubled caution. During the better part of the afternoon they followed the trail steadily downward. They could now see the lower sweep of the glacier, and a deep valley, beyond, mantled with dark lines of spruce. The travel was growing rougher as the glacier was beginning to pitch towards the lowlands, and among the hollows and hummocks it was difficult to see the trail far ahead. They did not worry, however, as they knew that they could see men, or dogs a long way off against the gleaming snow, and they were certain, moreover, that the strangers had already reached the timbered lowlands. It was without the slightest warning, therefore, that they came to the first clew to the mystery that had baffled them. They were descending a steep ice-fall where they were forced to remove their snow-shoes, unhitch the dogs, and ease the sleds down separately. Beyond was a level bench of snow a quarter of a

mile in extent. During one of their rests, George pointed along the trail and said, "What's that dark spot ahead of us?"

"Can't make it out—it looks like a hole in the snow," Fred answered.

After bringing up the dogs they pressed on eagerly. As they approached the spot they noticed that the trail crossed a large crevasse on a strong snow-bridge. It was George's turn at the gee-pole, and Fred, who had run ahead, suddenly stopped and beckoned excitedly. Urging the dogs into a run George soon reached him, and then he understood Fred's agitation.

In the centre of the snow-bridge, as if to mark the trail, stood a firmly planted shovel with its blade in the air. Beyond the bridge the snow was broken by many tracks, but what brought them to a sudden stop, was a smooth groove, such as a heavy, sliding body might make, that led downward from the trail into the cold depths of the crevasse, and following the groove a crimson line stood out in bold relief against the dazzling whiteness of the snow.

CHAPTER V

THE MAN WHO WON

THE trail was very fresh, and the boys read the grim story as easily as if it had been written in black ink. "Shorty" had been breaking trail some forty feet ahead of the dogs. "Long-foot" had left the gee-pole and jumped into the soft snow beside the sled. It had been his last jump for the white snow bore the full impression of his falling,body. Beside "Shorty's" trail lay an empty 30.40 cartridge, the sickly smell of smokeless powder still clinging to it, and in the depression where "Long-foot's" body had laid, was a deep red stain. To the right the snow was torn up by the frantic plunging of the frightened dogs, and the sled had been turned by their struggles until it stuck in the soft snow. Then "Shorty" had returned, and after dragging "Long-foot's" body to the edge of the snow-bridge had consigned it to its long sleep in the depths of the glacier. So far the

signs were plain, but the shovel mystified them. Fred was eyeing it curiously when George returned from a second survey of the tracks. From his position at one side he saw, by accident, the explanation of the mystery, for the slanting light disclosed fine scratches on its rusty surface.

"There's writing on it!" he exclaimed eagerly, and a careful examination revealed the following words scratched on the hard metal:

"Here lies the body of 'Moose' Nelson. Shot in self-defence by William McLain."

That was all, but to the two boys it meant volumes. It meant, in the first place, that the last of the luckless party was possessed of a sort of rough honesty. For, although the shovel was but a temporary confession, it showed that McLain was ready to confess his deed. As they now felt sure that they would overtake him before the day was done, this slight insight into his character was of benefit to their peace of mind.

Nothing was to be gained by remaining at the scene of the tragedy, and after they had satisfied their sense of duty by calling into the crevasse in case Nelson might be still alive, they roused up the dogs and once more took up the trail.

It was apparent at once by the tracks in the snow that McLain was having a hard time of it. At first he had tried to handle the team from the gee-pole of the sled. But without a trail-maker the dogs had floundered slowly through the soft snow. At last he had gone ahead pounding the snow down with his snow-shoes and leading the lead-dog with a rope. This method had proved more satisfactory, but without a guiding hand on the gee-pole the sled often overturned among the ice hummocks, and overran the dogs on the steep pitches. Again and again he had returned, and, single-handed, righted the sled, and after a time they found a deep rut in the snow where the trail ran downhill that told them that McLain had lashed a pole to the uprights of the sled to act as a break and keep it from plunging over the dogs. In time, as they saw more and more signs of the stranger's patience and grit, they began to feel a growing sympathy for the man, and they soon forgot their cautious advance and trotted steadily downward towards the sheltering timber.

Their rapid pace soon brought them to the last steep pitch in the glacier, and in their interest at again seeing nearby spruce groves, and sheltered

camping spots, they forgot for a minute to keep their eyes on the trail. A low growl from Baldy brought them back to earth with a start, and glancing downward they saw a human figure bending over a sled that had overturned on one of the steepest pitches on the last slope of the glacier.

Baldy's growl was followed by a chorus of howls as the rest of the team saw the strange dogs, and in an instant they were plunging down the hillside dragging the sleds behind them. George jumped aside as the dogs swept past him and grabbed the lash ropes of the sled in a vain attempt to help Fred who was struggling manfully to keep the trail.

There was little time to notice the stranger, but in a fleeting glimpse George saw him disappear in a cloud of snow as his own dogs pulled his sled over the steep slope.

Thanks to their efforts they were able to keep their sled straight, but the dogs became entangled in their harness and were badly knocked about before they came to rest at the base of the glacier. As soon as they could tear loose from the tangle and get the snow out of their eyes, they turned towards the stranger's sled, but all they could see

was a dark mass half buried in the snow and a few dogs vainly attempting to break loose from their harness. George took the precaution of snatching up his rifle and then he followed Fred who had already started forward.

When still some distance from the wreck, they saw that there would be no use for firearms, and a closer view disclosed the man's still form, pinned beneath the heavy sled. He was unconscious when they reached him, and after beating off the snapping dogs they raised the sled, and soon had the injured man comfortably fixed on some blankets and a cover that they found on the sled.

After Fred had rubbed some snow on the man's face, his eyes opened. For a long time he would make no answer to their questions, however, although his eyes shifted constantly from one to the other. After the boys had untangled his dogs, and unloaded the sled, he raised himself on his arm and spoke in a low voice.

"I thought you was the ghost of the feller up there," he nodded towards the glacier. "Did you see the shovel?" he added, looking at George.

"Yes, we saw it, and read what you wrote on it, but you better not try to talk now. Judging from

THEY SAW THAT THERE WOULD BE NO USE FOR FIREARMS.

the look of things you're going to have plenty of time to talk later on."

McLain gave them a startled look, and tried to rise, but on the instant his face blanched and he gave up the attempt with a wry look.

"I'm done up, all right," he said with a short laugh, "but you fellers won't believe it when I tell yer that I've got no kick comin'. I've been through hell in the last three weeks, and next to that this place is Heaven and you two kids and the dogs is a bunch o' angels." At the end of his remarkable speech he smiled a contented smile, and without knowing why, George and Fred began to like the man. There was no time to be wasted, however, in idle speculations, for the sun had dropped behind the mountains and a savage glacier-wind was sweeping downward from the ice-fields.

Three hundred yards below them was a group of storm-stunted spruce trees, and the ghostly pallor that was creeping over McLain's face told them that they must act quickly. With infinite care they lifted the injured man onto the sled and, with Fred breaking trail and George at the gee-pole, they brought him down gently to a camp-site that

they found in a tiny clearing among the spruce, trees. While Fred made the spot ready, George returned for their own duffle, and within an hour they had cut boughs and firewood, pitched the tent, made McLain as comfortable as might be, and arranged separate quarters for the two dog-teams, who were anxious to fly at each other's throats.

Despite their great responsibilities, the two boys were wild with delight at their new home. The sight of trees after their long woodless journey among the icy peaks was joy enough in itself, but in addition they felt the thrill of ownership that comes over men who are building a home in an unknown wilderness.

"We've got enough dry wood for a year within one hundred yards of the tent!" Fred cried joyfully, as he sawed a dry spruce into stove lengths, and George, who had just returned from the frozen river bank, proudly exhibited two brimming pailfuls of ice-cold water.

"Heard it running under the snow, and when I shovelled a hole I found a stream running through an ice channel!"

"Bully for you!" Fred shouted, "no more

melting snow like we had to do on the glacier. From now on we can have a drink whenever we want it."

In addition to the everyday comforts, there was another matter of the gravest importance that made them look on their new home with the deepest relief. It looked like a good place to find big game. The amount of food that men can carry in the wilderness is limited by the weight the dogs can pull. But if you increase the number of dogs, you must, in turn, increase the amount of dog-food, and sooner or later you are forced to realize the fact that you must kill game or starve. Now, even in the wilderness, there are huge stretches of country where no big game is to be found. Sometimes the reason is difficult to fathom, but usually it is due to a heavy snowfall that drives the moose and caribou to localities where they can find their food more easily. In crossing the range of snow-capped mountains, the boys had reached the dry interior where moose and caribou abounded on the plateaus at timber line, and the white big horn sheep found food in plenty on the mountainsides that had been swept bare of snow by the winter winds. Although the boys did not know of their good fortune

they were experienced enough in wilderness lore to sense it, and as they finished their last camp chore and entered the tent, their faces reflected a look of confidence that brought courage to the helpless man who, by a queer trick of fate, had been entrusted to their care.

Luckily for "Shorty" (Fred and George still used the old name) the boys had had some experience in caring for injured men, and as he himself had spent his life in the wilderness he was able to take command when the boys were at fault.

Fred busied himself with preparing food and heating water while George turned his attention to their strange guest. After removing his parka and moccasins George began a systematic search for possible injuries. At first he feared that the man might have received internal injuries from the weight of the heavy sled, but evidently the soft snow had saved him, for outside of a badly sprained ankle he seemed to be in perfect condition.

"I remember twistin' my foot when the sled *killapied.*" McLain said in a tired voice. "Outside o' that I guess it's sleep I need—I can't remember when I've had a chance—to—rest." His voice drifted off into a contented sigh as he finished,

and the next instant he was wrapped in a deep sleep.

"Shorty's" slumber gave them a chance to do the many necessary duties that remained to be done before they, too, could roll in their blankets. The first of these was to feed the dogs, and as the addition of McLain's team was a heavy strain on their dog-food, they gave them just enough to keep them contented until the following day, when they could take an inventory and see how they stood.

"Shorty" himself, however, was their greatest worry. Now that he was cared for and safe in the tent, the boys were forced to admit that the man was a grave responsibility. They felt that their first duty was to find out if possible the measure of his guilt in the death of Nelson.

Nelson's dunnage bag, which still remained on the sled, contained no evidence of any kind, but later, when everything was snug for the night and they repaired to their tent, they found an important document in the inside pocket of "Shorty's" mackinaw coat. It consisted of a rough diary that he had kept, and the seriousness of the situation quieted any misgivings that they might have felt at reading it.

The journal was the usual ungrammatical and laconic statement of the wilderness man, consisting chiefly in the days of the month, the number of camps, and the weather conditions. Occasionally a few words that might be of value in future travels were inserted, such as: "No wood above camp 26—had to pack it," or: "No meat but birds, dog-food getting low." They had gone through more than half of the pages by the dim light of a candle, before they came to any entry that suggested an explanation of Nelson's death. It consisted of four words: "Nelson getting trail sore." From then onward, however, there were more and more references to Nelson most of which spoke of his ugly disposition. One of the entries said: "Nelson has not spoke to Jim or me today."

The scent was growing warm, and as the boys eagerly turned the next page they started as they read the tragic words: "Jim went today—Nelson says he broke through the ice." The word *says* was underlined. From there onward McLain had kept a complete diary, as if he had begun already to sense the coming tragedy. At first the entries consisted of the regular complaints such as: "Nelson's mad again," or, "Nelson is not doing his

share of work, and has not spoke for two days." But at last they came to the entry,—"Glacier camp. It's going to be Nelson or me, he beat up my dog today and pulled his gun when I told him to stop." Then they read that, on the day following, "Nelson packed his gun all day, I got to do something." On the following two days he had written nothing, and then came the last entry in the book: "I haven't slept a minute for three nights. Today I get him or he gets me. God knows I don't want it, but I got to do it or get killed, he got Jim, I know it now."

As they finished, the burnt-out candle guttered and went out, and as they sat there in the little tent they lived over in their minds the grim struggle for mastery that the two men had waged. They were still ignorant as to how the final struggle had started, but "Shorty's" entry that he had not slept for three nights told them that for thirty-six hours at least the slightest slip or lack of watchfulness would have cost him his life. To them, even the journey across the snow-bound mountains and treacherous glaciers, had been a thing to look back upon with horror, but when they thought of the ordeal that "Shorty" had overcome, they looked on

him with undisguised admiration. They had been so wrapped up in their thoughts that they had forgotten the fire and suddenly they found that the tent had grown cold. George opened the stove-door and put in a liberal supply of spruce, and in the light that came through the tiny draft hole, they began to undress for the night. As the dry wood began to crackle, they were startled by a choking gasp behind them and, turning, they saw "Shorty" clutching for his rifle. "A fair fight in the open is all I want, a fair fight!" he gasped, and then the light of reason came into his eyes and the sweat poured out on his brow. "I thought I was back there—on the ice," he muttered, and sinking back, his overworked body relaxed and surrendered again to sleep.

During the whole of the night and most of the following day "Shorty" slept, and the boys devoted their entire time to putting the camp in order.

To their relief they found that "Shorty's" sled carried a mixed outfit of four hundred pounds, at least half of which consisted of flour, beans, dried fruit, sugar, and bacon. As "Shorty's" tent and stove was larger than theirs, they decided to use it. First they shovelled down to a firm foundation and

after laying a deep covering of spruce boughs, which they covered with a tightly drawn tarpaulin, they moved in, and their old tent became a combination store- and workroom. They shovelled out comfortable quarters for the dogs, chopped and stacked a large supply of dry wood, and broke a firm trail to the water hole. While they worked, heaping pots of beans and dried apricots were bubbling on the stove, and by the time that that night fell they had a camp that was a delight to the eye.

Shorty awoke while they were preparing their supper, and after he had enjoyed the luxury of a wash in hot water, he ate some thick bean soup, a hard tack, and drank a cup of tea.

He was suffering considerably for he was badly bruised, but, luckily his great strength, and the magnificent condition that he was in after two months on the trail, would have enabled him to recover from a far more serious accident.

In the few words that they had with him before they turned in, they found that he was an experienced trapper, and he was enthusiastic over their plan of trapping fur until the snow had melted and they could begin their prospecting.

"We'll find fur here, and you kin bet on it," he said emphatically, "and as soon as you git ready, I'll tell you all I know."

"We hunt meat tomorrow," Fred told him, and continued: "The dog-food's getting low, and we got to get busy and hustle some grub."

"That's a good guess, fellers, but—" A troubled look came into Shorty's eyes, and he hesitated an instant before he went on—"but that grub 'o mine's all yours if you want it. I don't mean to say I intend to sponge on you all winter, fer just as soon as my game leg gets limber, I'll hit fer the tall timber and give you fellows breathin' room. An' while I'm shoutin' my head off I might as well say that I've got a book in my mackinaw coat that's got the dope in it about my ruction with Nelson. It was on the square—him or me had to go and he had his hand on his rifle when I cut loose. I don't want to talk about it, but if you fellers want to know anything I'll tell you all I know."

"We read your diary last night, Fred and I, and we think you did right," George answered, and Fred, who never forgot his indebtedness to Dan Draper, said: "We'd have done the same for any man who was in trouble, so don't worry about

what you're going to do when your ankle mends. You have as much right to this neck o' the woods as we have."

Shorty said nothing further, for he had been brought up in the close-mouthed wilderness school, but the boys could see that his mind was at rest, and after cleaning their guns they turned in so as to be ready for the hard day that was coming.

CHAPTER VI

THE MEAT TRAIL

NOTHING but the hard work the boys had done during the past weeks could have made them sleep through the excitement of the night, for there is only one thing that can come to wilderness men that equals the thrill of the hunt, and that is the discovery of gold. As the following day was to decide whether there was big game in the great valley that had become their home, they made their plans with the greatest care. The small valley in which they were camped, narrowed to a cañon a mile below. On each side of this deep hollow, level uplands swept up gently from the forests to the rolling plateaus that followed the base of the mountain range. It is on these plateaus, where the snow is blown away by the winter winds, that big game is apt to congregate, and knowing this fact they made their plans accordingly.

The eastern sky was just turning to a cold, pale blue, when George and Fred emerged from their tent. The camp was still wrapped in darkness, but the uneasy whining of the dogs showed that they knew something was on foot. The cold was intense and the boys were well muffled in their parkas, the hoods drawn tight about their faces. After they had bound on their snow-shoes, and taken their rifles from a rack in a nearby tree, they called a low good-bye to Shorty and followed by his cheery call of "Good luck and meat to burn!" they disappeared among the spruces.

At first they travelled down the valley. George was breaking trail, his long upturned snow-shoes moving silently in the powdery snow. Their breath showed white on the cold, still air, and although they wore moose-skin mittens over their heavy wool gloves, they were forced to keep their fingers moving constantly to drive out the cold. As it was the first time that they had had a chance to look about them since entering the valley, they took a keen interest in their surroundings. The snow-covered mountains that walled in the valley gave them the feeling of walking through a deep blue tunnel, but the light of the rising sun soon

turned the upper snow-fields to gold and they realized that they were to be blessed with a perfect hunting day.

George's keen eyes soon located a track some distance ahead of them.

"That's big game all right!" Fred cried jubilantly, as they advanced, but on reaching the trail they found that it had been made early in the winter.

"Let's see what made it," George suggested, and they followed it toward a growth of willows that were almost buried in the snow. Several of the willow stems had been cut off cleanly and on seeing them George said, "Moose!"

While they both felt encouraged, they did not let themselves become too optimistic and Fred said, "It's a moose sure enough, but it's two months since he was here and he may be a hundred miles away by now."

As they proceeded, however, the willows became more numerous and they began to see other tracks. Hard beaten rabbit runways criscrossed the white snow, and several lynx tracks, great rounded depressions, skirted the spruce groves; the dainty footprints of weazles, which become ermine in the

winter time, were everywhere, and farther on, where the spruce groves became thicker, they saw a track that made their eyes gleam with excitement. It was like the ermine track, but larger, and the very interest with which the boys examined it, bore witness to its importance.

"It's marten as sure as shootin'," George said, at last. Fred's face broke into a wide smile, and he executed a clumsy war dance on his snow-shoes.

"If there are marten here we'll find lots of 'em farther down in the timber!" he cried.

"If we do we can make big money. Marten in this country ought to be prime and we should average $8.00 a skin," George soliloquized.

Fred who was severely practical began to draw sums in the snow, but George stopped him with a laugh. "Catch your marten before you count 'em, Fred, and remember, we've got to find meat—a fellow can't eat fur."

About two hundred yards above the cañon George halted, and said, "Here's where we split, Fred. There seems to be no wind to speak of, so it's a toss-up as to which side of the valley will be the best. Supposing I strike north on the timberline and you do the same on the south."

"That suits me to a T," Fred answered and after a cheery "Good luck," they separated. The walls of the valley were not very steep, but they were about two hundred feet high. The long Indian snow-shoe is not so good for climbing as the compact shoes made by the white man, but by grasping the ends of snow-buried branches George was able to pull himself upward, and during his rests he could see Fred gamely struggling against the same odds.

At last, however, they reached their respective crests, and after a farewell wave of the hand, they parted for good.

George's first view of the country above the cañon confirmed his hopes, for it bore all the ear-marks of a fine game range. Below him a line of dense forest skirted the base of the mountains. Above the timber the land rose in a series of broad benches. Those lower down were sparsely timbered, but as the spruce and birch trees disappeared, their place was taken by thickets of willow, which forms the chief food of the Alaskan moose. Higher up, the snow had been blown away by the winter winds and he could see great pastures of brown grass sweeping upward among the rocky

peaks. At intervals, too, broad valleys ran far back among the mountains. It was a land to make a hunter's heart beat high, but in its vastness and snow-clad grandeur there was a menace that would have frightened any man not brought up in the wilderness school. While George saw and appreciated the beauty of the scene, he wasted no time on its terrors, but began to move forward among the timber-line trees with the silence of a shadow. Experience had taught him that most hunters move too quickly while hunting, and in the wintertime especially, absolute silence and vigilance are essentials to success. In addition it was his first glimpse of the new country and he did not let one detail escape his eager eyes, nor did he risk the chance of spoiling or overlooking some favourable stretch, by blundering forward too quickly. The sun was a help, for the air, though still well below zero, was warmer, and he could stand motionless without running the danger of a frost bite. The surface of the snow was broken everywhere into lacelike patterns made by the feet of wild things. Millions of ptarmigan tracks speckled the snow among the willows where they had been feeding, and now and then George saw immense flocks of

these beautiful snow-white birds, and turned aside for fear that they might take wing and frighten some wandering moose from its bed in the timber. Fox tracks ran everywhere among the rabbit trails for this valley was untouched by man, and George's eyes glistened as he realized that some of the tracks might have been made by black foxes whose skins would bring several hundred dollars from the fur dealers. On the edge of timber-line he also found many lynx and marten tracks, and it was all he could do to resist the desire to go back to camp and return with some traps. Once he saw a broad trail that crossed a hill below him, and on reaching it he saw that a hunting pack of timber-wolves had been ranging the mountains. "I'm glad I didn't run into them," George thought to himself, "for if I had I would have forgotten our need for meat and shot every wolf I saw." Finding the wolf tracks was a mixed pleasure, however, for game will soon leave a range where these murderous beasts are hunting.

After travelling about a mile he found his first moose track. He came on it suddenly as he was gliding through some stunted spruces. It was the trail of a big bull and it led straight down hill

toward timber-line. Before following it, George took a careful look around, for it was possible that the animal had made a detour and come out on the open hills above him. He saw no tell-tale black spot on the hills, however, and was just turning to follow the trail when his eye caught a familiar white speck on a mountain-side far above him. As his eyes focused sharply he made out another white speck against the wind-dried grass and then several more. Watching steadily he waited and soon a joyful light filled his eyes—they were sheep—white big-horns! It was all he could do to hold himself to the moose-trail, for there is nothing that draws the real hunter as does the pursuit of the big-horn among the rugged mountains. But it would have required a steady climb of several hours to get above the sheep, whereas the moose track was fresh and close at hand. George also knew that if the sheep were not frightened they would remain in the same locality, whereas the moose might travel many miles before the next day, so after making a mental note of the exact position of the band of big-horns, he turned and began to follow the moose-trail.

The success of a tracker depends entirely on his

ability to interpret the impressions that the snow has retained. It sounds simple but there is nothing that is more difficult to learn, for to interpret a track correctly means that the tracker must have an intimate knowledge of the habits of the animal he is tracking.

While George had not yet gathered enough experience to make him an expert, he had learned rapidly, and, in the two years that he and Fred had hunted together, he had advanced far beyond his companion in the branches of wilderness lore that called for keen observation and the power of analysis. His success was due in part to the mental concentration with which he attacked any problem, and as he followed the moose's trail he threw his whole mind into the attempt to decipher the mysteries that the snow had recorded.

The first thing that he discovered was that the trail had been made before daylight. There were two things that led to this deduction; the first was that the soft snow thrown out by the bull's feet had settled a little under the morning sun, and the second was that the trail ran fearlessly across the opens. Even in little hunted country the moose are cautious, and whenever there is timber

at hand they remain under cover as much as possible.

The next conclusion that George arrived at was that the moose was headed toward some definite spot.

He was led to this conclusion by the steady pace the moose had maintained, and by the fact that he had not followed the line of least resistance, but travelled due east towards the timber. The same thing was true after the moose had reached the protecting trees, for, with the exception of a slight turn to the north, the trail was as straight as the denseness of the timber allowed. The natural conclusion was that the bull was travelling towards some spot where he was in the habit of lying down, for there was nothing about the track to suggest that the animal was frightened.

Now, although the moose had passed several hours before him, George was not foolish enough to travel quickly. He knew that the bull might have stopped at any time, and he advanced with the utmost caution. Luckily, the snow was soft and dry and his snow-shoes sank into its powdery surface without a sound. His one desire was to find some sign that would show that his quarry

was about to lie down. He realized, however, that the tracks might give him no warning, so he kept a careful watch on the country ahead of him. After he had travelled about a mile, he came to the edge of a small willow-choked valley. He could see the moose's trail leading downward into the bushes, but before coming out into the open he seated himself on a fallen tree and studied the outlook intently. He had been seated but an instant when his ears detected a faint noise and looking down the valley he saw, some seventy yards away, a dark shape moving slowly through the willows. In a flash his rifle was at his shoulder, and as the sights came into line his finger began the gentle pressure that would send the steel-jacketed messenger hissing towards its mark. At that very instant, however, the finger relaxed, and although his eyes still gleamed along the blue barrel, he waited. Something, he knew not what, had made him stop, and he watched the dark shape for an answer.

An instant later, his face went white with a sickening fear, for the dark body had risen slowly and between the horns of his rear sight he recognized Fred's familiar form. His first feeling was

one of indignation, but as it passed he realized that there must be some good explanation for Fred's presence on his side of the river, and, rising to his feet, he gave a low whistle. Fred turned at once, a startled look on his face, which turned to a guilty smile as George reached him.

"I had my gun on you and was pulling the trigger when something stopped me—you oughtn't to have done it," George said in a whisper.

"You're right," Fred answered in a low voice, "but I sort of got led into it. Look here," he said as he pointed to a moose track that joined the trail George had been following, "I found that trail the minute I reached the other side of the cañon. It seemed like the moose was looking for a place to cross over to your side, so I followed it at first in the hope that I might nail him before he had gone far, but when I got started the trail led me across the cañon in a place where the walls are broken down—there's a hard-beaten game trail there. This track was the freshest so I kept on. I was hoping that you'd stick to timber-line, but all the time I knew that I was an idiot for hunting on this side, and I know that it would have been

my own fault if you had cut loose at me without asking any questions."

"Well, it's all right now, Fred, but I was so scared when I found that I had my gun trained on you that I got mad when I had time to think. It's been a good lesson, so let's stop worrying about what's done and gone and see what we can see of these two moose."

The boys had talked in a whisper, and as soon as they had compared notes, George led the way on the trail of the two moose. It was soon apparent that the animals had not been together. Fred's moose which, from its tracks, appeared to be a young cow, had found the trail of George's moose and was following it. As the new tracks were very fresh the boys redoubled their caution. After they had travelled half a mile the tracks began to wind in and out among the trees. At the same time George noticed a hill ahead of them. It was well timbered with a growth of birch, and he decided instantly that somewhere on the ridge the moose were resting.

The trail led around the base of the hill and after a whispered consultation the boys spread out on each side of the trail in case the moose had circled

on their tracks, as they frequently do before lying down. As they advanced like shadows, they strained their ears for the slightest sound. Sometimes the dreary call of a moose bird, or Canada jay, would come from some distant tree, but in all that great wilderness it was the only sound. Suddenly a faint whistle reached George's ears. As he had travelled some distance to one side of the trail he had become separated from Fred, and wondering what his whistle could mean, he glided softly towards him. In a few seconds he came in sight of Fred who was leaning listlessly on his rifle beside the moose-trail, and his surprise was turned to disappointment as he pointed to the tracks, and said in a loud voice: "It's all up, George, they heard, or winded us, or something—see—they started to run here."

For one startled second George glanced at the snow, "Run—nothing," he answered hotly, "they trotted." As Fred stared blankly, a faint, cracking noise came from the crest of the ridge, and George dashed forward. His ears had told him the whole story, and his one thought was to reach the end of the ridge in time. Once his snow-shoe caught on a snow-buried snag, but he righted

himself in mid-air and ran onward. As he came around the end of the ridge he stopped short in a small clearing; a large, dark animal was just disappearing into the forest, and his rifle crashed as soon as it touched his cheek, but a flash of white from a snow-laden branch above the moose's back told him that his shot had gone high.

CHAPTER VII

BRAIN AGAINST BRAWN

AS George stood there, panting from his exertions, a wave of bitter regret swept over him. Nor was it the petty disappointment of a hunter who has missed a shot—it was the deep disappointment of a man who has suffered a serious stroke of ill fortune. Their success in trapping, the possibility of finding Lucky Simpson's mine, and even their very lives depended on their securing meat, and now when success had been within their grasp, Fred's unfortunate error had spoiled it all. Even in the heat of the moment he harboured no resentment against Fred, for he knew that he fully realized the gravity of his mistake. Furthermore the men of the frontier cannot afford to waste time over what is past and gone—it is the future that must be reckoned with.

These thoughts flashed through his mind in far

less time than it has taken to write them, and even before he was aware of the powerful impulse that had gripped him, he was trotting along the bull's trail. Before he reached the timber a whistle halted him, and turning, he saw Fred rounding the ridge. The sight of his companion instantly crystalized his half-formed resolve, and halting for a moment he cried, "Go on back to Shorty, Fred, I'm going to follow this moose if he takes me to the Yukon," and as Fred stood, rooted to his snow-shoe tracks with amazement, he turned and disappeared in the timber.

For perhaps an hour George followed the trail blindly. He knew instinctively that the moose would travel a long way under his first impulse of fear and that the time for caution had not arrived.

In time, however, the silence of the snow-buried woods, the stab of the still cold, and the continuous effort of ploughing through the deep drifts, began to exert a quieting effect on his troubled thoughts. As he began to notice the things about him he saw with surprise that he was following two moose, for he had forgotten the cow that Fred had discovered, and had failed at first to notice her tracks.

The discovery brought him back to the seriousness of his task, and he began to devote his entire attention to the trail.

"This is going to be a question of wits against speed," he said, with a determined shake of his head, but he had not yet learned that the man who tracks down a frightened moose in the Northern wilderness, must possess an iron will and body, as well.

As he settled down to the steady toil he took an inventory of his belongings, which represented the usual outfit of an Alaskan hunter. His right hip pocket held five 30–40 cartridges that, with the four in the magazine of his rifle, would be ample. In his watch-pocket was a small compass that was fastened to his suspenders with a moose-skin thong, while his watch hung from his neck, beneath his shirt, from a second thong. In his right front pocket he found a small whet-stone, and hanging from his belt was a sheath-knife, a small hatchet, a tin cup, and a canvas bag that contained a small bannock that was split in half, and filled with fried bacon and granulated sugar. It was the inside pocket of his shirt, however, that held the most important things of all—a patent

water-proof match-case, filled with the little sulphur matches that will light when they are damp, and the stub of a wax candle. Next to the matches the candle was his most valuable possession, for the touch of a match would make it burn, and even a man with frozen hands could start a fire from its steady flame. A candle-stub has saved many a man's life in the Alaskan wilderness. George's inventory was made as he crossed the occasional openings through which the moose-trail led, and when he had finished, his face wore a confident expression, for he knew that he was fairly well prepared for any emergency.

With his mind at rest he could give his entire attention to the tracks, and he noticed with satisfaction that the moose were travelling northward along the foothills of the Kachiltna Range. He found, too, that they had lowered their speed and were moving at the slow trot that eats up the miles without apparent effort. This meant that the animals had recovered from their first frantic fear, and that they were beginning to feel the effects of their hard run. George knew, furthermore, that it was now that the sagacious animals would begin to use all the senses that nature had

given them to elude him, and he redoubled his watchfulness in consequence.

One thing that perplexed him was that the moose seemed to be travelling northward with a definite purpose. Now and then, when the trail crossed a hill, he would catch a glimpse of the country ahead, and he noticed that about fifteen miles away a spur of snow-capped mountains ran eastward from the Kachiltna Range. The moose, therefore, were entering a deep pocket that was bounded by icy peaks, and he was cheered by the thought that before long the animals would have to make a circle to escape from the mountains that barred their path.

As the afternoon wore on, the sun began to fall behind the Kachiltna mountains. Long blue shadows crept across the snow, and in the shadow of the timber the frost stabbed cruelly. George's first enthusiasm had begun to wear off, and his body began to tire under the ceaseless toil. He found himself questioning the wisdom of keeping on. It would be so easy to stop. The moose-trail led on as if it would continue for ever, and Fred and Shorty would not criticize his failure. He thought of the warm tent, the sizzle of bacon

frying on the stove, and his parched throat ached as he thought of the water bucket beside the tent door. The vast wilderness seemed to grow more sombre and menacing as the shadows deepened.

Again and again George was at the point of giving up, but away down within him was a spirit that said, "Don't be faint-hearted. Keep on a little longer." And in answer to his inner self he would continue his struggle through the snow. But the time came when the light was shut off by the western mountains, and the tracks of the smaller wild things began to fade under the sombre mantle of night. Then the moose-trail became an indistinct blur and George realized that the day was over, and that the time to camp had come.

By some chance the wilderness was kind to him, for in the next belt of timber he came to a great spruce that had fallen before some savage blizzard. Its thick-matted branches were covered deep in snow, and beneath this natural shelter George chopped himself a home. Nearby were green and dead spruces in abundance, and with a thick bed of boughs to lie on and a leaping fire to warm him, he faced the cold night without fear. By melting snow in his tin cup he quenched his thirst,

and a third of his liberal lunch, eased, if it did not satisfy, his hunger, but despite his good fortune the night seemed to last forever. When he slept, the fire would die down, and after rebuilding it he would sit shivering before the growing flames.

At such times he would give up all thought of following the moose-trail, but when the long night dragged to an end, and the sun burst above the eastern ranges, it seemed to carry courage in its warm rays, and putting the old temptation behind him, he turned northward on the trail of hardship and danger.

The first few hours of the second day passed uneventfully, but then a change came over the tracks. One of the animals (a study of the trail told him it was the cow) began to turn aside and rest. After these turns she would take to the bull's trail again and follow on, but little by little the rests became more frequent, and finally the cow turned aside for good.

George passed her trail with scarcely a thought. He knew that in all probability he could overtake her more quickly than the bull, but his fighting blood was beginning to rise and the bull's trail was a challenge that he would not ignore. There

were deep hollows under his cheek bones, and his eyes were tired and sunken from the ceaseless searching for the trail, but his body had been worn down to bone and sinew, and he moved with the effortless gait of a wolf.

After passing the cow, the bull's trail dipped down into a broad valley where wide stretches of snow-covered fallen timber separated the groves of spruce. It was the hardest kind of snow-shoe travel, for he broke through the snow that covered the cavities between the logs, and had to laboriously circle many of the fallen trees that the bull had passed in a stride. It was here that George realized for the first time the wonderful way in which nature has equipped every animal to fit the environment in which it lives, for the long, powerful legs of the moose enabled him to plough steadily onward through the deep snow and tangled tree trunks with the same ease and rapidity that he would have travelled on level ground.

At last the trail entered a dense growth of spruce and began to wander among the trees. Without a moment's hesitation George passed through the grove to the farther side, for he realized that the bull had spent the night there, and that he had

probably gone on again. On emerging from the trees George's theory was verified for he saw the bull's trail leading upward towards the head of the valley. For a moment he was highly pleased with himself, but on reaching the trail a wave of discouragement swept over him—the bull was running again, and that could only mean one thing—the bull had either seen or scented him when he entered the valley. For the second time George was tempted to give up, but although he was almost convinced that the quest was hopeless he stuck doggedly to the trail, and, as so frequently happens when the future is darkest, he was soon rewarded with a gleam of hope. In climbing a snow-covered hill the moose had slipped and fallen, and the snow showed clearly where the great beast had struggled to get on his feet. This was the first sign that George had seen that indicated that the moose was beginning to tire, and in an instant his indecision was gone, and he continued his relentless pursuit.

The trail now led up the broad valley that was walled in by the ice-clad peaks of the two ranges. The timber was beginning to grow scarce, and in consequence he could occasionally see the trail

a long way ahead as it wound among the frozen hills. This fact cooled his ardour somewhat, but it also gave him time to think, and before long he made a momentous discovery. The left-hand wall of the valley was formed by the eastern slope of the Kachiltna Range, and as he advanced, he discovered that one of the mountains was separated from the main range by a narrow pass that offered the only exit by which the moose could escape. The entrance to the pass was still some five miles ahead of him, but already the bull's trail was veering towards it. In a flash George saw his opportunity. If the pass merely separated the mountain from the main range, the moose would be forced to make a large circle that would bring him out on his old trail.

To think was to act, with George, and in an instant he had turned and was travelling at top speed over his back trail. The change in his plans put new life into him, for now he was headed towards home. This meant that he could afford to eat another portion of his bannock sandwich, for ptarmigan were numerous, and if he failed to intercept the moose he could shoot enough birds to last him to camp. His old trail, moreover, made

travelling comparatively easy, and as his snow-shoes carried him along he gnawed contentedly at the bread and bacon.

The detached mountain that he expected the moose to circle, now became his predominating interest. To his delight, a careful study of its rugged form disclosed the fact that the southern end of the pass was only about five miles ahead of him, which confirmed his conviction that the moose would have to travel many miles more than he. Furthermore his route lay along the level benches at timber-line, whereas the tired bull would have to climb at least a thousand feet higher. His success now depended on speed alone, and throwing caution to the wind he sped along the trail. On account of his magnificent condition, or, possibly, the mysterious state called "second wind," he moved across the frozen landscape with the regularity of a machine, and by the time that the sun had begun to dip towards the icy peaks of the Kachiltna Range he was securely hidden in a small grove of stunted balsams that commanded the southern end of the pass.

The hours that he had spent on the trail had passed with lightning speed, but now that his

great effort was finished he found that the time began to drag. Soon the cold that crept down from the ice-fields began to enter his feet and hands. Knowing well that exercise was his only ally, he began to twist and bend his body until he could feel his warm blood begin to circulate. Luckily there were wild things about to keep him interested. A flock of ptarmigans alighted near-by and began to feed on the tips of the willow branches that had been freed of snow by the mountain winds. As he watched them they suddenly flattened themselves among the snow-drifts, and while he was wondering at their strange behaviour, a velvet-winged snowy owl came gliding upward from the timber and drifted unsuspecting over the very spot where they lay hidden. Then a fox came quartering up wind and the wise birds took to flight with derisive cackles. A half-hour later George had a good laugh, for a fat arctic hare blundered into his retreat having evidently mistaken him for a dead tree-stump, and it nearly fell over backwards with surprise when it discovered its mistake.

After an hour had gone by George began to feel worried. According to his most conservative es-

timate the moose had had ample time to cross the pass. The cold, too, was increasing as the sun fell, and in spite of his constant exercise his feet and hands were becoming numb. Little by little his tenseness relaxed as his chances of intercepting the bull grew less, and he began to make plans for his second night in the open. By turning in his footsteps he could study the vast sweeps of forest below him, and although the possibility of failure confronted him he was glad that his frigid vigil was almost ended, and that he would soon be able to build a shelter and sit before a cheerful blaze.

He was aroused from his pleasant thoughts by a slight sound that came from the snow-fields above him, and as he turned, his body stiffened as if he had received an electric shock, for ploughing downward through the powdery drifts came his quarry —the moose whose trail he had followed relentlessly for many a hard-fought mile.

George never forgot the picture the huge beast made, as, with his breath coming in white jets, he swung downward from the snow-filled pass. The bull's natural dignity of carriage was enhanced by the certainty that he had eluded his enemy, and

once he stopped and threw his head disdainfully towards his back trail, as if he was glorying in the knowledge that his speed and strength had conquered. Below him was the sheltering timber, and without a thought of danger he turned and stalked towards the grove of stunted balsams.

It is to George's credit that he regretted the shot. Now that his brains and grit had triumphed he was satisfied. He would have gladly left the easy part of killing to someone else. But the first law of nature is to live, and the moose represented *life*, not only to him, but to Fred, and the injured man, and their dogs as well.

After the echoes of his rifle shot had died away among the mountains, he drew his skinning-knife and moved forward, and darkness had settled over the vast solitude before his labours were ended. Staggering under his heavy load he stumbled towards the timber, but in the dark he missed his way and was forced to camp on a narrow bench that jutted from a steep, heavily timbered hillside. At least there were spruce boughs, and dry wood in plenty, and when he had drunk all the water he needed and had eaten a generous piece of moose meat and the last of his bread and bacon, he rolled

ONCE HE STOPPED AND THREW HIS HEAD DISDAINFULLY TOWARDS HIS BACK TRAIL.

[redacted]

himself in the moose skin and slept the sleep of exhaustion.

When George awoke, about seven hours later, he was conscious of a restricted feeling. At first he attempted drowsily, to find a more comfortable position, but to his surprise he was unable to turn.

He was wide awake in an instant, and as he tried in vain to throw off the heavy skin, he realized that it had frozen into a solid case around him. For a moment he was badly frightened, but he soon regained his composure, and began to concentrate his mind on the task of extricating himself from his strange predicament. His first thought was of his sheath-knife, but he remembered that he had hung it on a nearby branch the night before. His next move was to test the strength of the frozen skin. Although he did not realize it the temperature had fallen to forty degrees below zero during the night, and in consequence the skin had hardened to the consistency of iron. But luckily the inner folds had remained soft on account of the heat from his body, and by working with infinite patience he at last succeeded in gaining some freedom of movement.

The next thing to be accomplished was to turn over, and by twisting his body with all his strength he found that he could make the moose skin roll on the bed of boughs that supported it. Encouraged by the discovery, he began to twist his body rhythmically back and forth, and at last, by a supreme effort, he rolled the skin completely over. His delight was momentary, however, for instead of coming to rest he felt himself rolling down the steep hillside, and an instant later he felt a severe shock that was followed by a rush of cold air. It was some time before George could appreciate the good fortune that had come to him, but when his wits returned he found that the skin had been jarred loose by its impact with a tree and he soon succeeded in freeing himself from his strange prison.

In the meantime Fred and Shorty had been having a dismal time in their camp below the glacier.

"George is crazy as a loon!" was Shorty's verdict when Fred had repeated George's last words.

"This bushwhackin' a moose that's been badly scairt is the toughest game a man kin tackle." He continued as he sat mending some dog-harness. "I've been a moose-hunter since I kin remember,

and I'm givin' it to you straight when I say that I quit huntin' whenever a moose knows I'm on his trail. There's lots o' fellers what'll talk about runnin' down a scairt moose, but in all the years I've packed a gun I've only met up with a half-dozen—countin' Injuns—who could turn the trick."

"Well the only thing I hope is that he don't get hurt or frozen," Fred answered with a worried look, as he knocked the snow from his snow-shoes, and hung them on the tent-pole.

During the afternoon they worked on their marten and fox traps, and on the following day, Fred laid out a trapping trail to the north. He hoped that he might meet George or hear him shoot, but he returned to camp disappointed. It was while he was cooking the evening dog-food that he noticed that the temperature was falling rapidly. As the darkness came on the water-bucket froze beside the stove, and as Shorty filled the fire-box with fresh wood, an anxious look settled on his face, and he said: "If George don't show up by tomorrow noon, it'll be up to you, Fred, to go after him."

During the long night the slightest sound awak-

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ened them, and Fred kept a roaring fire going in case George should appear. They were up long before dawn, and as they cooked breakfast they talked over the serious situation.

"When I start, I'm going to go with the idea of staying as long as I want to," Fred explained. "Three dogs will pull my outfit and I can make fast time above timber-line."

"You've got the right idee, boy," Shorty agreed. "You kin camp at timber-line, and cut down into the lowlands every few miles, and if George has passed by ye'll strike his trail."

By ten o'clock everything was ready, and Fred and Shorty were perfecting their plans beside the stove, when a furious uproar broke out among the dogs. With one sweep of his hand Fred threw the tent-flap open, and the next moment he saw George plodding through the spruces that circled the camp. In the first startled glance he saw the familiar grin spread across George's lean face, and then he gave way to the flood of relief that swept over him, and yelled with delight.

At first they asked him so many questions that he could not answer them, but at last Shorty frowned at him with mock severity, and said:

"No more o' this chasin' moose to the Yukon, young feller—you'd oughter know that it's too hard a game to beat."

"That's where you have another guess coming," George answered with a wink at Fred. "I got my moose before he reached the Yukon—he's waiting for us now about fifteen miles out along my back trail."

CHAPTER VIII

THE TRAPPING TRAIL

WITH meat in camp, and the secure feeling that came from the knowledge that there was big game on the mountain-sides, they settled down to the work of trapping fur. With Shorty to give them helpful suggestions, they made few mistakes and beginning at timber-line, they laid out a trapping line on each side of the valley. Most of their traps were set for marten, but ermine, foxes, and lynx were numerous, and before a week had gone by there was a handsome line of furs hanging in the store tent.

Shorty's sprain was mending splendidly, and in a week's time he could move about without difficulty. In the peaceful atmosphere of their camp his nature had undergone a change that would have surprised him had he fully realized it. All he knew was that he was supremely happy, for

it was the first time in his long life of hardship and adventure that he had felt the emotion of true affection. Prior to his meeting with the boys his only companions had been the hardened, close-mouthed men of the frontier, and while some of them had claimed him as "pardner" for long or short periods, the bond was more a working partnership than the result of real friendship. But from the day that the boys had found him, and, despite the blood on his hands, had cared for him, Shorty had been drawn towards them. At first he had noticed only the cheerfulness with which they worked together. And, while appreciating it as an outdoor man would, he put it down to the irresponsibility of youth, but as time went on, and he noticed with amazement that the boys were well able to take care of themselves in any emergency, and that their friendship was based on the stern rule of fair play and unselfishness, he began to regard them with a feeling of admiration that soon ripened into the strongest affection. As his years in solitary camps had made him taciturn and undemonstrative, he found it difficult to show his appreciation in words, but long before he was able to walk without crutches he began to

do a hundred little things that added to the boys' comfort. With the aid of a box and some cross pieces, the boys had made him a comfortable chair, and in his days of convalescence, it became his throne. Seated in the door of the tent, within reach of the stove, the water-buckets, the kitchen-box, and the wood pile, he would busy himself all day long. Returning from a ten hours' round of the traps, the boys would find him sitting there awaiting eagerly the news of the mountains, forests, and valleys that they had seen, and while they talked he would set before them steaming stews of moose meat, golden brown sour-dough biscuits, and dried-fruit pies that made the boys' eyes roll with delight. With experienced fingers he mended their moccasins and snow-shoes, and shaped the drying-boards on which they stretched the pelts. There was nothing that was torn or broken that his skill could not repair, and everything in the camp from the dog-harness down to the kitchen stove was as trig and shipshape as man could ask. When the boys would try to thank him he would redden with embarrassment and growl, "Any man kin be a squaw. I'll be wearin' ribbons in my hair and takin' up fancy-work afore long."

In time, the boys learned to make him their last court of appeal in all the problems, great and small, that confronted them from day to day. When a wary fox would steal bait after bait without touching the carefully concealed trap, Shorty would be called on to solve the difficulty; when a small band of moose began to yard near Fred's trapping line, it was Shorty who decided that meat was more valuable than fur, and who engineered the making of a new line without alarming the band; he taught them the right way to set traps for each of the different fur-bearing animals, and gave them long dissertations on the peculiarities of the wild things that enabled the boys to double their fur catch.

It was when Shorty was beginning to take his first hesitating steps that trouble descended on their peaceful camp. For several days the boys had returned from the trapping lines with worried faces. As time went on the worried look changed to one of dismay and, finally, to black anger. The climax came when George came into camp with the feet and brush of a magnificent black fox, and Fred, arriving soon after, reported the discovery of the remains of three prime martens that had been

eaten after they had been caught in the traps. There was no mystery about the robber, any frontiersman would have known that it was the work of a wolverine.

Now, there is no animal between sun and snow that is more hated and feared by the frontiersman, than the wolverine. Picture a broad, low body, combining the strength of a wolf with the compactness of a badger; arm it with sharp, ripping claws and gleaming teeth; end off with deep-set eyes that literally gleam with malice and vindictive cunning, and you have a fair idea of the wolverine. Of all the animals of the wilderness he is the only one that has no fear of the *smell* of man. In fact, his greatest joy seems to come from following man and preying on his efforts. He is a robber of traps, a cache-breaker—a thief in the night!

While Shorty was preparing a hasty supper, George was reviewing aloud their list of grievances. "The first sign of a wolverine that I have seen was beyond the White Sheep mountains. It must have been ten days ago. I saw his track following the trapping line, and he had eaten an ermine out of the first trap he had come to. He had then followed the trail to the next trap, and chewed up

a fine black marten that was caught in a dead fall. I was scared blue for fear he would keep on and visit some more traps, but for some reason he was satisfied with the damage he had done and turned off into the timber. I didn't say anything to you fellows for I had a plan, and when I left camp next morning I took a piece of moose meat and three fox traps with me. I had no trouble in finding the wolverine tracks, for less than a mile from here he had come into the trail, and by the time he had left it he had chewed up two marten and a red fox. The red fox wasn't eaten—he'd just chewed it out of pure cussedness. Well, I set my fox traps in a ring and hung the moose meat where he'd be sure to find it, and next morning the meat was gone and the traps were all sprung. I could see from the tracks in the snow how he'd got hold of the wires and pulled the traps around."

"One did the same thing to me—darn him!" Fred said fiercely.

"Wait—'the worst is yet to come,'" George continued grimly. "The next day there were three wolverines on the trail, but I had reset my traps, and caught a young one. He fought like a mad thing when I clubbed him—it was the only

time in my life that I enjoyed killing. Well—the thing has grown worse, today I saw four wolverine tracks and I know that at least three of the trails were made by different animals—I'm through, tomorrow I'm going to bring in my traps."

For a short time they sat in silence pondering the question. At last Fred began to speak. His story was a repetition of George's hard-luck tale.

When it was finished he said, "My trapping trail is beaten down with wolverine tracks. There must be a dozen using in the country ten miles south of us— so after thinking it over I quit—I've taken all my traps in and cached 'em at the top of the hill."

For once Shorty could offer no advice. "If we had some poison we could give 'em fits," he said, thoughtfully. "But as it is I guess we'd better hit the trail for some new diggings."

Although the boys would not admit it, they had been thinking of moving camp for several days. Shorty's inability to travel far had been the only thing that kept them silent. As they shook their heads dubiously, Shorty turned on them with mock severity. "I know what you two fellers is thinking.

You figure that I can't stand the hiking! Well—all I got ter say is—that when Shorty W. McLain can't wag a foot he'll be four feet underground. No more foolishness," he added as George began to remonstrate. "We'll hit the trail tomorrow, and I'll sit on the load if my game leg gets bad, so hike along and git your traps an' I'll save this grub for sometime later in the day."

When they were reconciled to the idea of moving, the old longing to be on the trail gripped them strongly, and they talked eagerly of their plans as they jogged along the hard-beaten path that ran down the valley to the point where the trapping lines started out to the north and south. There was no uncertainty as to where they should go, for in the long days that they had tramped the mountain-sides, they had always looked longingly eastward to where the snow-powdered summits of the unnamed mountain range loomed against the winter sky. As Fred had already gathered his traps he joined George, and as they climbed out of the valley they stopped for a moment and looked out over the lowlands towards the mountains that they were to explore. Below them lay the great valley, its forests of spruce blending into a blue

carpet. Here and there they could see white lines among the trees that marked the course of frozen rivers. The stream on which they were camped was one of these, and all of them combined formed a large stream that swept southward into the blue haze of distance. The scene was overwhelming in its grandeur, but although their eyes could travel over unnumbered miles of highland and valley, there was not one thing in the whole vast sweep of mountain and forest that suggested the presence of man.

As the river seemed to be the only route that promised an easy crossing of the valley, they wasted no time in conjecture, but trotted onward towards the end of the trapping line. The winter sun was getting low when they reached their goal, and with numbed hands they began to take up the traps. The work was progressing rapidly, and they had covered a good half of the trail when George, who was removing a trap that he had fastened to a small birch tree, heard the high pitched howl of a wolf. Outside of a moment's pause to locate the direction from which the sound came, he paid little attention to it, although he felt a moment's regret that he did not have his rifle

with him. Fred, who had been running towards him from the last trap, had not heard the call.

"That must be one of the band that were using here when we first came," he said when George had told him. They stood listening for a moment, but they heard no sound but the first rustling of the night wind among the snow-laden branches, and turning to their task they began to gather the traps as they came to them. Less than a quarter of an hour had passed when the silence was again broken by the clear call of a wolf. This time both the boys heard it, and Fred said, "That wolf is following something."

"If he's alone he's calling for the rest of the band —a wolf won't run moose unless he has a pack behind him."

"It just goes to show what a fool a man is to go without a gun. If we'd only brought one we might bushwhack that fellow."

"Yep. We might. And I'd give a night's sleep to get one, too, for there is no animal in the North that is seen so seldom."

Again they started down the trail, but this time they had gone scarcely fifty yards when the howl of a wolf came from each side of the trail. They

were in a dense growth of balsam at the time and the wolves seemed to be only a short distance behind them. For a moment the boys were too surprised to speak, and when Fred regained his composure his face relaxed into a wide grin and he said, "Well! Don't that beat the Dutch!"

George's first feeling was one of amusement, too. Both of the boys knew that there was not one chance in a million of the wolves attacking them. When, however, the howls of several wolves came from the distance, they began to look serious. It was getting dark rapidly, and they were still three miles from camp, but a mile more would take them out of the timber, and once in the open they felt sure that their unwelcomed visitors would depart.

Luckily, they each had a small hand axe, in a holster on their belts, and grasping the keen-edged weapons they pushed on rapidly. They were not frightened, but the feeling that you are surrounded with wild beasts that you cannot see, is not a pleasant one.

For a long time there was no more howling, but the gentle movement of branches and the stealthy crunching of soft paws in the snow told them that

the wolves were all about them. At last Fred gave voice to his feelings.

"This travelling with a bunch of ghosts is getting under my skin—look there—did you ever see anything to beat it?" He was pointing towards a stunted balsam. Its branches had been weighted down with snow, but something had forced its way under and as the snow was dislodged the branches sprang upward in a cloud of glittering snow-dust. They knew that a wolf had done it, but that was all. Not even the tip of a pointed ear had shown, although they saw its tracks when they had passed the spot.

"What beats me is how they can tell that we are unarmed," George said.

"Same here!" Fred replied. "We're loaded down with steel; steel traps, steel axes, and I've got a pocketful of cartridges, and yet the beggars know that we can't hurt them."

"They certainly do," George cried. "Look at that!" Fred almost stumbled, he stopped so quickly, for in the very centre of the trail, some twenty yards ahead of them, sat a great black wolf.

During the space of a long breath the wolf and

the two boys watched each other and then George stooped. When he rose a set trap flashed from his hand. It struck a dead limb behind the spot where the wolf had been, and the jaws snapped with the clean click of steel striking steel, but the wolf was not there. He had not moved as far as they could tell, he had disappeared—just ceased to exist. For some time they saw no further signs of the pack, although they could hear the steady crunch of soft paws among the trees, and as the trail came out into the open the leading wolves seemed to draw aside. About one hundred yards above timber-line, the boys stopped and looked back. The sun had fallen behind the western ranges and through the sombre mantle of night the spruces loomed like dark spires. As they watched, furry shapes detached themselves from the black line of trees and stood silhouetted against the snow. For a moment they stood motionless and then they faded from sight.

After the tension of the last hour, the boys gave way to the feeling of relief that came with the knowledge that the beasts had gone. A low howl came from the forest as the pack struck some new trail, and Fred called: "Good-bye, Black wolf,

I hope I'll meet you again," and then, sotto voce, "when I've got a gun handy!" "Same here!" George answered, laughing, and after a last look over the dark valley they turned and trotted steadily homeward.

Shorty, sitting in his chair near the tent door, heard them coming, and throwing some more wood on the fire, he put on the stew and slipped a pan of fresh-mixed biscuits into the oven. His sharp ears told him that something unusual had happened, for above the jingling of the traps he could hear the boys laughing and talking over their experiences.

He greeted them with a cheery, "What's up, boys?" and his face took on an expression of surprise when they began to recount their experience.

"Only twice have I heard tell of such a thing," he began, when they had finished; "once was in the Kuskoqwim country and t'other was in the Talkeetna Hills. A prospector started overland for the Susitna Country, and when he got above timber-line a bunch o' wolves followed him. They stuck to him like hard luck sticks to an Injun and he slept in trees for three nights. No, they didn't try to hurt him none," he said, in reply to Fred's

questioning. "They just travelled along and kep' tabs on him, so to speak. Away over beyond the Cashwhitny they ups and strikes a moose-trail and leaves him."

While the boys ate their late supper, Shorty regaled them with stories about wolves that illustrated their uncanny knowledge of man's ways. He told them of sled dogs killed in the traces while the driver's back was turned; of dogs that had disappeared mysteriously from the fireside, never to return, and of men, or the remains of men, found in wilderness camps. "But of course these are just handmedowns," he concluded. "This is the first real wolf story I can swear to and I'm much obliged to you two fellers, for from now on, when the fellers git to tellin' long yarns around the stove in Palmer's store back in Kanuk, I kin jest lay it all over 'em."

CHAPTER IX

THE HUNGER TRAIL

EARLY the following morning they moved down the snow-filled valley. The jingle of dog-bells was missing, for a moose could have heard the sound a long way off, and by travelling silently they hoped to add to their rapidly shrinking supply of meat. In other respects the dogs were in fine fettle, and now and then when a flock of ptarmigan would take to flight with a roar of wings, it was all that Fred could do to keep them from running over George, who was breaking trail. Shorty followed behind, driving his own team. The boys had insisted on his taking a light load, so that he could ride whenever his leg grew tired, and although he protested vigorously they won their point.

The first day's travel was through a deep cañon, and at dusk they came out into a small, circular

valley where they pitched camp. There were moose tracks on the ridge that rose behind their tent, and although they were at least ten days old the outlook for meat was not discouraging. The second day George returned for their last load and Shorty rested while Fred broke ten miles of trail ahead.

It was these trips through the deep snows, when he had to depend on his own resources, that George loved more than anything else. Not that he disliked human companionship, but because it was only when he was alone that he could fully appreciate the vastness and grandeur of the snow-bound solitudes. Although he did not realize it, the spell of the North was creeping into his blood, and as his body grew in strength and ruggedness under the toil of the wilderness life, he gained in knowledge concerning the ways of the wild. At first the awesome solemnity of the vast forests and ice-clad ranges had filled him with a nameless fear. Danger, and even death, were present in many strange forms along the wilderness trails, and although he was no coward, he had learned to harbour a wholesome respect for the power of Mother Nature. But little by little he had gathered

knowledge; every mistake, every discovery, and every failure that he experienced, increased his knowledge, and as he used this knowledge intelligently, his ability and confidence increased.

But aside from his love of adventure, George was possessed of a deep love for the wilderness itself. Fred and Shorty were severely practical. They regarded the snow as a cold, white substance that a sled would slide over, and they looked on the vast mountain ranges that rose against the winter sky as masses of rock and ice that barred their path and increased the hardships of travel. To George, however, the snow was a magic carpet of beautiful colours, on which the life stories of the wild creatures were written in mysterious characters, and the mountains, with their lofty peaks of snow and majestic glaciers, awoke in him an appreciation so deep that it was akin to reverence. The result was, that while Fred and Shorty accepted the white world about them with a certain good-natured tolerance, George was drawn to it with an overpowering enthusiasm. This difference in their temperaments became more and more apparent as their difficulties increased.

Four continuous days of hard travel had carried

them to the river that drained the eastern slope of the Kachiltnas, and as they advanced the tracks of wild things grew steadily fewer, until, with the exception of an occasional stray ptarmigan, they saw no wild life whatever.

After caching their fur on a wooded point they took in their belts a hole, and followed up a good-sized stream that came from the east. As they fought their way eastward their outlook grew steadily darker, for day after day they travelled over snow that was unbroken by a single track. Their meat was about gone, and they put the dogs on half-rations and began to use their precious store of dry food. Although Fred and Shorty were undaunted by their ill fortune, they despaired of finding meat, and suggested a return to the Kachiltna mountains, but George was fired with the desire to explore the mysteries of the eastern ranges, and he urged them to keep on.

"What if the meat *is* running low," he argued. "We're just as liable to strike a game country by pushing ahead, as we are by going back. I know that our grub wont last until spring unless we get meat, but we are travelling towards the Tanana Divide and we know that we can find caribou there."

For a while Shorty was undecided, but at last he nodded his head and said: "Danged if I don't think you're right! The big Ketchumstock caribou herd winters on the Tanana Divide, and if we kin once meet up with 'em we kin kill enough meat to feed a tribe o' Injuns.

Once committed to the plan Fred and Shorty worked valiantly, and from that day onward they accepted their full share of responsibility in the risky venture. The stream that they were following was a typical wilderness river. For the first twenty miles it had run through dense walls of cottonwood and spruce, but as it began to rise towards the mountains the trees were less numerous, and now and then they came to small openings, or "moose pastures," as Shorty called them. At the end of the eighth day a cold wave swept over the eastern ranges from the Yukon Basin and the temperature stayed at forty below zero with grim persistency. The travel grew more difficult and they began to encounter ice-falls, where they had to remove their snow-shoes and chop steps to keep from slipping. Between the falls lay stretches of smooth snow, and as George went ahead, breaking and chopping trail in turn, he

heard Shorty call, "Keep yer eyes open fer '*overflows*'."

Now George had often heard of that bane of the Northern traveller—the "overflow"—but as most of their travel had been in the Kachiltna mountains they had not had the ill fortune to encounter them. He knew, too, that the temperature was in the neighbourhood of forty below, and that he must be careful. Unfortunately, however, knowledge of the wilderness can only be gained by actual experience, and, although he noticed that the snow ahead of him had turned to a dull grey colour, he thought nothing of it and tramped steadily along. The next instant the crust had broken under him and he was floundering in two feet of ice-cold water.

It was lucky for George that Shorty was alive to the dangers of the situation, for he wasted no time in helping him out, but dashed for the nearest timber. As he ran he pulled matches and a candle stub from his pocket, and by the time that George reached him he had started a fire and spread his parka on a space of trampled snow. By right of experience he took command, and the boys lost no time in obeying him. Fred was dismissed with

a curt, "Get dry wood and lots of it," and then seating George on his parka he cut his moccasins and trouser-legs open with his skinning-knife.

"There's no time to untie 'em, and besides they're frozen hard already," he explained.

In an incredibly short space of time George's numb feet were exposed, and after seeing that they were not too close to the leaping flames, Shorty rubbed them briskly with dry snow.

"They're not even frost bitten," he said with a note of thankfulness in his voice, and then his face grew serious, and he added: "This has been a good lesson, young feller, and I want it to stick in yer mind, so I'm goin' to tell yer sumthin'. Thar's nuthin' in the whole of Alaska that'll kill a man surer than gettin' into an overflow in cold weather. And I'm givin' it to yer straight when I says that if ye'd gone five minutes longer without a fire ye'd have had to git measured fer a pair o' wooden feet."

While George was thawing out his trousers and donning dry underclothes and foot-gear, Shorty philosophized on the uncertainty of life in the Northland.

"An overflow usually comes from springs," he

said, as he ended his lecture. "Sometimes the water gits on top o' the ice through a hole or crack, but no matter where it comes from ye want to keep shy of it. Never try out snow that looks like its got water under it—leave that job to some crazy feller who's tired o' livin'."

As Shorty said, it was a good lesson, and in all the snow travel that came to him before the arrival of spring, George never got caught again.

On the following day they left the ice-falls behind them, and camped on the edge of a great semicircular valley. It was surrounded on three sides by smooth snow-covered mountains that fell away on the east to a vast stretch of level country.

"Mountain sheep and caribou to burn," Shorty said, as he gazed at their wind-swept summits, but the hungry days that they had experienced made them chary of taking anything for granted. The valley was well timbered, and as far as they could tell during the time they were pitching camp it looked like a good fur country.

"That's one of the queer things about Alaska," Shorty began, as he tautened one of the tent guys. "You get into some neck of the woods that looks

as if the game would be so thick that they'd rub each other's hair off, and you can't find even a rabbit track, and then again you strike some pickayune moose pasture that's tromped down with tracks like a county road."

Fred, who had just started a fire in the stove, nodded his head in agreement. "Let's look the ground over before we go any farther," he said.

George seemed to think well of the scheme. "Without meat we can't afford to take many chances, and there's no use settling down in this valley if there isn't any game about," he said.

Shorty instantly fell in with the boys' plan. Since the day when they had found and cared for him he had done everything in his power to give as little trouble as he could, and now that he was able to do his share he never forgot the great obligation he was under. On several occasions he had gone so far as to suggest leaving the boys, but they would not hear of it, and at last Shorty had agreed gladly to the accidental partnership, and said no more about it.

Since the beginning the boys had made no secret of their mission, for in the first place they knew that Shorty knew that they were looking for gold.

Shorty had been equally candid. Sometimes the boys would talk over the matter when they were alone, and they both agreed that Shorty should share in anything that they found, but their chances were so uncertain that it seemed foolish to make any plans. In the meantime they were delighted with their fur catch, which was already worth a good sum, and their anxiety to begin trapping again spurred them on to even greater efforts.

Before turning in they talked the matter over, and when the question had been argued from every side, Shorty expressed their decision as follows: "There's no use in makin' plans 'till we know what's ahead of us. My notion is that we want to get a good look at this country, and then if it don't suit us we can shake it and take another look see. Now supposin' that we all hit the trail tomorrow? I'll go north towards the mountains, George can hit for the head of the valley, and Fred kin try to find caribou in the hills to the south."

The plan was accepted with enthusiasm, and without wasting any time they crawled into their sleeping-bags and were soon wrapped in slumber.

Early the next morning found George snow-shoeing steadily eastward. As it was his duty to

thoroughly explore the valley for fur signs, he moved at a comfortable pace and kept his eyes open. Fred and Shorty were more liable to find meat than he, for they were going into localities where the chances of discovering game were good, whereas all he could hope to find was a wandering moose.

As he went on silently through the snow-hushed woods he became more and more absorbed in the things about him. For some reason there had been a heavy snowfall in the valley, and many of the balsam trees were capped with great turbans of snow, that gave them the appearance of white mushrooms with dark-green stalks. For a while he saw no tracks, and even among the willows by the river banks he found no rabbit runways. One rabbit track that ended in a few drops of blood told him that a great snowy owl had found a meal, and the large depressions made by the feet of a lynx spoke of the ceaseless struggle for existence that is going on continuously among the wild things. Up to this time George had been depending on his eyes alone, for there was not a sound in the snow-buried forest, and the frosty air bore no scent but the clean smell of evergreen

trees. At last, however, he was conscious of a new impression. So slight was it that he had to stop to determine what it was. A deep inquiring sniff of the cold air told him—for he caught the tang of wood smoke. Wetting his nose he sniffed again,—yes, it was unmistakable. Without stopping to think, he knew that it was not the scent of his own camp, for he had been travelling up wind. As he stood pondering the question a new impression reached him—his ears had caught a new sound. Sometimes it ceased entirely, and then a faint drone, like the hum of a lone bee, gathering honey, would reach his ears. Something told him that the sound was not far away, and he began to move forward silently. Before he had gone far a break in the gleaming carpet of snow caught his eyes, and before he reached it he had recognized the familiar shapes of snow-shoe tracks. The trail was old, but as it led up the valley, George followed it.

Twenty yards farther the tracks turned into a willow thicket, and as George followed, his eyes bent on the trail, he brushed against something soft, and looking up he saw what was left of the body of a rabbit, hanging from the noose of a wire

snare. The body had been partly eaten by some wild creature, but the close-fitting noose had continued to hold its prey. New sensations were coming thick and fast, and George began to apply his reason to the unravelling of the mystery. Experience told him that the snare was the work of an Indian, and that the rabbit had been caught many days before. The smell of wood smoke was stronger now, and the question that suggested itself was: "Why should an Indian set a rabbit snare close to his camp and then fail to visit it?" The answer to the question might cover many possibilities, but as George wanted facts, he slipped his rifle from its moose-skin case, and took up the trail once more. Another fifty yards brought him to the edge of a clearing, and as he stopped to spy out the snow ahead, he saw the haze of wood smoke rising from a dilapidated tent that was pitched beneath some tall spruce trees on the farther edge of the clearing. After stepping silently behind a tree he began to study the camp intently. It was with a feeling of surprise that he noticed that there were no signs of dogs about the place. Now in the winter-time dogs are as necessary to the man who travels the wilderness as a dory is

to a Cape Cod fisherman, but after George had cudgelled his brain to find an explanation of the riddle, he had to give it up. He could see that the camp was a permanent one, and no temporary affair. He had begun a further searching examination, when he was interrupted by a low wailing song that seemed to come from nowhere. As he listened a shiver ran up his spine, and he took a sudden step backward,—for the song meant death. He had heard it before, among the lodges of the Coast Indians when the white plague was raging.

As the wail ceased, George regained his composure, and following the white man's habit of plunging straight to the heart of a mystery, he gave a loud call and advanced at a steady pace towards the canvas shelter. His greeting was answered by a guttural exclamation, and as he reached the door he heard an Indian's voice saying, "Come, white man, come," and kneeling in the snow he parted the door flaps and gazed within.

The first thing that he saw was the emaciated face of a middle-aged Indian staring at him from the end of the tent. To his salutation of "Hullo, stranger," the Indian nodded his head, and George then entered the tent and, seating himself on a

block of wood beside the stove, began to talk. George had been little among the Northwestern Indians, but he began by talking the pigeon English used by the traders.

"What for you in bed?" was his first question.

"Hi-u sick," the Indian answered.

"You ketchum grub, moose meat, dogs?"

"Me no ketchum—me eat dogs—burn sled."

"Leg he sick?"

"Yas. Me tink broke." The Indian pointed to a place on his thigh.

"You sit down Copper River?"

"Yas—me Nabesna." After a pause George returned to his questioning.

"How get sick?" he asked.

"Me ketchum sheep—snow cultus—me killipie—hy-iu sick. Me sit down dis place twenty sleeps, eat dogs." He held up three bony fingers to show the number of dogs.

Again George changed his line of questioning, and asked:

"You ketchum fox?"

"Halo fox."

"Why you come here?"

The Indian started to speak, but hesitated, and

after a long silence, said: "Me t'ink ketchum moose."

Using the necessity of putting more wood on the fire as an excuse George arose and began to straighten up the inside of the tent.

Never in his life had he been in such a dirty shelter. The few pots and pans looked as if they had never been washed, the blankets and tarpaulins were damp and mouldy, and a sack containing about twenty-five pounds of flour (which was all the food that George could see) was green with mildew. The rifle that hung from the ridgepole was the only clean thing in the camp.

Going outside, he found a small Indian axe with a chisel edge. It was the work of only a few minutes to chop up some dead balsam branches, and when a cheerful fire was going he filled all the pots with snow and placed them on the stove. As the snow melted he added more, until the pots were full of water. While waiting for the water to boil he busied himself with the problem of cleaning up the tent, but on second thought he decided to be satisfied with a small beginning, for unless the Indian's injury was serious he would have to be moved. In the corner of the tent lay a mass of

odds and ends—three dog harnesses; a squirrel-skin parka, badly in need of repair; several rolls of rawhide, and odd pieces of canvas. Underneath the pile he discovered a gold-pan in good condition, and using this for a basin, he soon had the cooking and eating utensils in order.

During this period of activity the Indian watched him with the stoicism peculiar to natives the world over, but his eyes gleamed when George, opening a bundle which he had taken from the inside of his shirt, disclosed some slices of fried bacon and two pieces of bannock.

It represented his lunch, but realizing that the Indian needed it more than he did, he put it on one of the cleaned pot-covers and handed it to him. The Indian took the food in silence, and eating slowly, consumed it to the last crumb.

While the Indian was eating George did his best to discover more about his dark-skinned host, but there was nothing about the pathetically ill-stocked camp to suggest a reason for the Indian's presence in the valley. He knew that his statement that he had come to hunt moose was only partly true. No one possessed of his right mind would come into that barren wilderness with the

single purpose of hunting for moose. If he had said that he had come to trap, George would have believed him, for the Indians are always journeying into distant and unknown mountain ranges in the hope of discovering good trapping grounds. The thought that he was a fugitive from justice was dismissed as improbable, and he finally was forced to let the matter drop. The question now arose as to what would have to be done to get the Indian out of his difficulty, and while he placed an ample supply of wood beside the stove he told the Indian that he was one of a party of three men, and that their camp was but a short distance down the valley.

As he slipped his feet into the moose-hide thongs of his snow-shoes, a thought occurred to him and he said, "You halo walk?"

"Me walk all same porkupine," the Indian answered, meaning that he could get about on all fours.

As George trotted homeward he tried in vain to find a way out of this new difficulty. If they did not look out for the Indian, his death was certain, and yet, if they did not find meat their own future would be equally dark.

CHAPTER X

SIWASH VALLEY

FRED and Shorty were still absent when he reached camp, and in order to keep his mind occupied with cheerful thoughts, he began to prepare their frugal supper. He had so much to ask and to say, however, that his ears almost ached from listening for the sound of returning snow-shoes. A dozen times he thought that he heard voices, or the crunch of snow-shoes, but each time he found that his imagination had tricked him. At last, however, the dogs began to bark, and running outside he saw Fred approaching. Watching him earnestly for any signs that might suggest what kind of a day he had had, George noticed that he looked tired and downcast, and Fred's first words reflected his mood.

"I've travelled twenty-five miles today if I've travelled a foot, and except for ten thousand cari-

bou tracks I haven't seen a thing—not even ptarmigans," he said disgustedly. As he removed his snow-shoes and changed his moccasins George told him of his discovery of the injured Indian. Fred's face grew grave as he listened, and when George had finished, he said:

"It looks like a bad business to me, for as far as I can see there's no game in this country. During the past month thousands of caribou have passed through the hills to the south, but they have all gone. Now between us and the dogs our grub won't last long, and if that Indian is too sick to travel we'll be up against it."

"Well, let's wait awhile and think it over, for when Shorty comes in he may have some good news," George suggested, as he filled the tea-pot with snow and put it on the stove to melt.

A few minutes later they heard a cheery hail, and Shorty appeared.

"What's the good news?" he cried, gaily, as he hung up his gun and binoculars outside and dusted the snow from his clothes.

"What's your good news, is the important thing," George answered, laughing.

"Well, let me think," Shorty said as he leaned

comfortably against his blanket roll. "My leg's most as good as it used to be for one thing—I killed a heap of miles today, and she ain't bothered me enough to speak of. Next to that I don't know much. I saw an all-fired lot of scenery, but live-stock was mighty scarce. In fact I haven't seen a track bigger'n a rabbit track, and unless you fellers have found somethin' enticin', I vote that we beat it afore we take to eatin' our moccasins."

George, who despite the bad outlook, could not help from laughing at the strange turn their fortunes had taken, then told Shorty of his experiences.

"Gee whitakins!" Shorty ejaculated, when the story was finished. "That news of yours sure does complicate our outlook. We can't sleep well if we leave the redskin to starve, and we'll starve if we invite him to join this here tea-party."

For a moment their supper was forgotten, and they sat with their brows puckered in thought. At last George broke the silence

"Well, let's get down to brass tacks," he began. "First of all we've got to find out what's the matter with him. He said his leg was broken, and

pointed to his hip. It may be that some muscle is torn, and that we can fix him up quickly."

"What gits me," Shorty answered, "is what the Siwash is doing up in this cold-storage plant. He says he hurt himself huntin' sheep, and that he came here to hunt moose, but that's all bunk. If he's from the Nabesna country as he says, he must have travelled right by a lot of good sheep mountains, and if fresh meat is what he was lookin' for, he'd be crazy to leave a good game country behind him and come up here where there's nothin' to eat but snow. I tell you," he continued, "all Indians is plum crazy, and this here friend of yours, George, seems to be the craziest one of the whole tribe!"

While they ate their supper nothing more was said, but when their appetites were satisfied they took a calmer view of the situation, and decided that they would do what they could for the Indian early the following morning. In the meantime Fred volunteered to take him some food, and after George had hitched up their dog-team he sped away with a small pot of beans and half a bannock.

As the dogs made fast time over the trail George

had broken, he was back in an hour, but he could add little to George's story.

"He gave me the same answers he gave to George," Fred said when he was seated comfortably in his sleeping-bag.

"He said that he came here to hunt moose, and that he was hurt while following two sheep. He said it was a bad sheep country, and that fur was scarce, but that sometimes there were lots of caribou. Now that backs up what I saw today in the hills south of us. There were caribou tracks there by the thousand, but the herd that had made them had gone."

Shorty nodded his head. "It's the tail end of the big stampede," he explained. "They come up from the Yukon, and when they git ter the headwaters of the Tanana they cross over into this country. Some of 'em goes farther east, but this part of the bunch winters pretty near here. If we have to, we kin follow their trail later and kill enough meat to last us out of the country. That's one good thing about caribou, when you once find a band you kin kill enough to last you through a long winter."

The boys were enthusiastic at the prospect of

finding caribou. During the preceding summer they had seen one small band, but they had never hunted this interesting animal and their eyes shone at the thought of the exciting days ahead as they prepared for a well-earned sleep.

Early the following morning their dog-team drew up at the Indian's tent, and while Shorty went in to talk to him the boys began to make the camp more comfortable. In an hour they had shovelled a large tent-site in the snow, filled it evenly with boughs, and covered it with the Indian's sled cover. The next thing was the moving of the tent, but this was easily accomplished without disturbing the injured man. The stove was then transferred to a firm foundation of green logs on which George had nailed some tin cans that he had found in the corner of the tent. They moved the Indian on a blanket, and when he was comfortably placed on the clean new bed they made a careful examination of his injuries. Shorty, to the delight of George and Fred, proved to be experienced in the rough frontier methods of caring for injuries.

"The trouble is in the hip all right, but as far as I can see there's no busted bones," he said.

"That settles it then—its a dislocation," George

replied. "You can see the leg is shorter than the other, and the foot turns in."

Shorty scratched his head, and said dubiously, "I've never tried to set a dislocated hip bone, but I guess we can stand it if he can."

The injury was aggravated by the long space of time that had passed since the accident occurred, but with much unnecessary effort, and the infliction of much suffering on the hapless patient, the joint was slipped into place. Throughout the long ordeal the Indian had not uttered a sound, but after the leg was firmly bandaged, and he had been given some tea and moose stew, he exhibited the first sign of feeling since they had found him.

"Hy-iu good!" he said, nodding his head in thanks. "Me take long sleep you no come."

"That's all right, Old-timer," Shorty answered good-naturedly, but you're not out of the woods yet. You've got to sit tight long time. We'll ketchum caribou, maybe, git lots o' meat, then things will come our way."

The next thing to be done was to gather the Indian's belongings together, and transfer them to the tent. George began by filling the gold-pan that he had used for a wash-basin on the previous

day, with all the small pots and eating utensils. He had started towards the tent with his load, when Shorty, who had begun to chop firewood, stopped him.

"Let me see that gold-pan," he said quietly, and emptying the contents on a piece of canvas he began to examine it critically.

"What's the matter?" George asked, but Shorty only shook his head and returned to his chopping.

In less than an hour the camp was as shipshape as they could make it, and after George had made a list of the things that they could bring from their camp that would add to the Indian's comfort, they jumped on the sled and drove the dogs homeward.

When they had reached the river, however, Shorty stopped the dogs.

"I've got a hunch," he explained with a smile. "In the first place that Injun has got a reason for being here alone. It's not meat, and its not fur—that much we know. Now Injuns don't give a whoop for scenery, and that gold-pan of his *has been used!* Now there is a hard-beaten trail leading from his tent into the timber, and I want you, George, to come with me and see what it

leads to. I've been thinking all along that this country looks like gold, and it's possible that the Injun has struck somethin'."

While they were lashing on their snow-shoes, they made their plans. Fred was to look out for the Indian during the afternoon, and they would return as soon as possible. A moment later the dogs were speeding down the river, and Shorty followed by George was pushing his way upstream through the deep powdery snow.

"The camp is about two hundred yards to the right of us," Shorty explained as they tramped along. "Now by following the river upstream we ought to strike the Indian's trail."

For some time they travelled in silence, and then they came to a good-sized tributary that joined the main stream from the right. Without hesitating Shorty followed it, and as he rounded a bend he stopped and whispered, "Bullseye for us, George. There's the trail." Looking ahead George saw a path that came out onto the level surface of the stream from the timber. On reaching it they found that it was well beaten, and that the Indian must have travelled over it many times.

"It's got all the ear-marks of a working trail,"

George admitted. "But you can never tell—he may have been setting traps out this way."

"Right you are, George, but it looks kinder queer. He has no outfit for trappin', and there's no fur in his tent."

They had turned into the new trail, and for some time they plodded steadily along. The stream bed had risen perceptibly and they could now see that the stream flowed through a slight depression between two low mountains.

"If this had been a trapping trail, he'd a turned off afore this—this trail is leadin' us direct to some place—you kin bet your bottom dollar on that."

Shorty spoke in a low voice, and Fred could see that he was labouring under that deep excitement that leads the Alaskan prospector on from one disappointment to another without destroying his faith in a golden future. George himself was beginning to feel a thrill sweep over him as the mystery deepened, but if he had doubted Shorty's reasoning before, the next bend in the river proved that he had been right. Fifty yards above them they saw an expanse of trampled snow. To the right was a pile of ice blocks, and below, a series of holes showed dark against the white background.

Trees were cut along the trampled bank, and Shorty, pointing to them, said: "He's been workin' here a long time—no wonder he didn't want to say nuthin'."

"What's all this burned wood in the holes for?" George asked.

"To thaw out the gravel so's he could shovel it out. From the look of things he's been diggin' here for the past three winters. No wonder he didn't trap—he didn't have to!"

Shorty was moving about as he talked, his keen eyes searching everywhere for further information. Suddenly he uttered a short exclamation, and reaching under a fallen tree he pulled forth a battered gold-pan and a prospector's shovel. "Here's the things I was lookin' for!" he cried, jubilantly, "now we kin take a look-see."

Unlacing his snow-shoes he climbed down into one of the largest holes and began to scrape up some of the gravel from between the large boulders. "This is a snipin' layout. These boulders would make hard workin',—and I can't git much dirt without thawin'," he grunted as he scraped the frozen gravel.

George in the meantime had filled an old bucket

that lay on the bank, with finely broken ice, and it was soon melting over a small fire. As it melted down he added more ice, until he had an ample quantity of water. Shorty in the meantime had gathered half a panful of fine gravel, and as he joined George he said:

"Throw some brush on the fire, young feller, and we'll be able to wash this dirt without freezin' our hands,—washin' gravel is a cold proposition at best."

A warm burst of flame followed George's efforts, and kneeling beside Shorty he watched the gravel as it rotated with the water in the pan. As Shorty threw out the large pebbles and flipped out the coarser gravel the contents of the pan steadily diminished, and it was soon apparent that the pan carried no unusual values. When almost all the gravel had gone, however, they began to see fine particles of gold.

"That's more like it!" Shorty cried. They both had outgrown the tenderfoot's theory that the mere discovery of gold meant riches, and so when the final yield of the pan showed only a fine streak of yellow, they took it calmly.

"This panful is no proof that the creek's no

good, so we needn't feel bad," Shorty said, as he warmed his chilled hands before the fire.

"That's true enough," George agreed, "the Indian may have cleaned out that hole, and while it doesn't look like rich pay we may be able to make a real strike farther up the creek."

"Now you're talking, sonny!" Shorty cried. "I told you last night that these here hills looked like gold to me, and for all we know we may strike another Klondike on t'other side o' this mountain." In an instant he was in a frenzy of excitement at the prospect of tracing the deposit of gold to its source—then a thought came to him. "We'll take a whack at that Indian first though, 'cause he'll be able to tell us how the gold lays in this yere creek."

"We'll have to take a crack at some fresh meat too," George said as they started on the home trail.

An hour's steady walk brought them to their camp, and after they had told their news to Fred, who was wild with enthusiasm at the prospect of finding gold, they enjoyed a hearty supper. Then armed with a liberal amount of food, they climbed onto the sled and sped towards the Indian's camp.

As the dogs drew up at the tent door Shorty

whispered: "You'd better let me do the talkin'. I ain't what folks 'd call a diplomatist, but I savvy Injuns a whole lot."

George and Fred nodded their agreement, and an instant later they were seated about the Indian, whose delight at seeing them and the good food they had brought seemed tempered by a certain uneasiness. Shorty, as his words had suggested, went straight to the point.

"What's yer name?"

"Nabesna Charlie."

"How much gold you ketchum, Charlie?"

"Ugh!" The Indian's answer was noncommittal, but a frightened look came into his eyes.

"Me follow trail up creek," Shorty pointed eastward. "How much gold you ketchum?"

"Me no ketchum—much."

"You ketchum grubstake—five hundred dollars?" Shorty continued.

"Angh."

"You ketchum one thousand dollar?"

"No—me no ketchum one tousand—me ketchum tenas grubstake."

"How long you work um?" Shorty took a new tack.

"Three winter—summer, water too stronk." To hide his feelings Charlie buried his teeth in a piece of bannock.

For a few moments Shorty seemed lost in thought. Then he said:

"You make um stake and record, all same white man?"

"Me no savvy stake," came the morose answer.

"How you hold 'em claim, then?" Shorty asked.

The Indian made no reply, but his eyes moved to the rifle that hung above him, and then dropped helplessly to his bandaged leg. The look said as plainly as words: "I hold it with my rifle, but now that my hip is injured I am helpless."

George and Fred were beginning to get uneasy. While they had perfect trust in Shorty's honesty, he seemed to be going a little too far. Shorty's quick eye read the boys' thoughts, but twenty years in the Northland had taught him that firmness is as necessary as kindness in dealing with Indians. With an admonitory, "Leave it to me, fellers," he continued his questions.

"You sit down here three snows?" he began.

"Ugh!"

"How you ketchum meat?"

"Some taime—long taime—moose he come. Odder taime hy-iu caribou. Caribou he come—he go." Charlie pointed to the south and made circular motions with his hands.

"That's good news," Shorty cried. "He means that the caribou mill around in the hills to the south of us, instead of travelling on farther—that means we can trail 'em up when we have to."

Then turning to the Indian he began to speak again.

"Now listen good, Charlie—me friend, him friend," he pointed to the two boys. "We no ketchum your claim. Your claim no good fer us. We sit down here long time. We fix your leg all same doctor. Bymeby you git strong—you ketchum gold. We hunt new place—we ketchum hy-iu gold—we ketchum hy-iu caribou—you savvy?"

"Angh!" The Indian answered stoically, but the look of fear left his face and he returned to his food with increased enjoyment. After the Indian had finished, they examined his leg, as well as the bandages would permit, and were glad to find that it was doing nicely. Charlie stated that the pain had subsided considerably, and after they had done

what they could to make him comfortable they seated themselves on the sled, and started the dogs towards camp.

As the sled glided through the darkness over the smooth trail they went over their talk with the Indian. Shorty was in a jubilant mood.

"I tell ye, boys," he cried gaily, "we're goin' to find a broad streak of yellow gold in these hills, and my say is that we move camp to the head of the valley."

"I'm with you, Shorty!" Fred chimed in, but George was thinking of the main issue.

"I'm keen on the gold, too, fellows," he said, "but we've got to live to spend it, and I feel like hiking out into the mountains south of here and rounding up some of those caribou."

"That's the ticket!" Shorty agreed. "You kin hit the high places after the caribou, and Fred and I'll move our residence into the mountains—as the newspapers say. We'll begin work on the Siwash Valley and Mountain Gold Mining Co."

Fred agreed enthusiastically to the plan, and when they at last crawled into their sleeping-bags they were ready for whatever fate might bring to them.

CHAPTER XI

THE FROZEN SOLITUDE

ALTHOUGH George had on several occasions spent a day or two alone in the wilderness, this was the first time that he had ever struck out single-handed on a trip that would, perhaps, last many days. While his spirits were bubbling over at the prospect, he was not foolish enough to belittle the difficulties or dangers that he might be called upon to overcome, and he used the greatest care in selecting his simple outfit.

The greatest responsibility of all was the dogs. Although his outfit was light, he would need a full team to pull home the meat he would secure if he was successful. On the other hand, Shorty and Fred could not spare more than three days' dog-food, and that meant that he would have to kill something or the dogs would go hungry. The fact that the dogs had had a fine rest cheered him,

however, for on a pinch they could starve as well as he. His only other worries were the care of his rifle and warm clothing.

"The wind will go through you like a skinning-knife out there on the caribou hills, and you may run into a blizzard that'll blow the rocks out of the ground, so take extry moccasins and gloves, and never leave camp without your parky," Shorty had warned as they were eating their breakfast.

An hour later all that remained of their camp was a circle of trampled snow and after a wave of the hand and a cheery "good luck" all around, the dog-teams parted on their separate roads. An hour's pull found George on the top of the low ridge that formed the southern boundary of the valley, and here he stopped and looked about while the dogs took a short rest. Due east of him lay the great expanse of rolling uplands that formed the winter range of the caribou, and stretching away over hill and hollow ran Fred's snow-shoe trail. "That'll make the pulling easier," George said, half-aloud, and Baldy whined in answer. To the south-west the uplands swept down to a broad-timbered valley and George at once decided that in this direction lay his safest route. "I

can travel on the uplands, and drop down into the timber when I want to camp," he thought. Despite the clear sunshine, it was bitterly cold, and George soon found that travelling was more comfortable than resting, so taking hold of the gee-pole he whistled to the dogs and took up his march again.

Baldy followed Fred's trail without a command, and George was able to look about him and study the lay of the land. He could see now that "Siwash Valley," as Shorty had named the valley in which they had found the Indian, was surrounded by an isolated group of low mountains. There was a broken line of hills that connected them with the Kachiltna mountains, and George surmised rightly that the sheep the Indian had seen were stragglers who had wandered from the higher mountains. Encircling the caribou hills, and so far away that they hung like mirages against the sky, rose a line of snow-covered mountain ranges. Every bit of the huge expanse was buried in snow. It was as grim and savage a landscape as the world could produce, and yet with all its bleakness it was magnificent. George's eyes gleamed as he moved steadily along. He had the feeling that

comes to all men who love the open—this was *his* country—all his. The game was his to shoot, the trees were his to cut, the water was his to drink, and the gold was his to dig. "It would take ten lifetimes to prospect just the mountains that I can see from here," George said to himself.

He was standing on the first rise of the caribou hills and as his eyes swept the country his figure stiffened and he forgot all about the gold, for a multitude of caribou tracks showed clearly on the next hill. Here was the beginning of his long trail, and after a look at the sled to see that everything was firmly lashed, he turned the dogs into the trampled caribou trail and travelled southward.

On the sides of the hills the sledding was difficult, snow-drifts, outcrops of rock, and small gullies barred his path, but George would work his way along—making haste slowly—until the trail would sweep to the top of some great plateau.

It was here that the caribou had fed, for the savage wind, sweeping down from the Arctic, had blown the snow away in places, and he could see where the herd had pawed up the lichen or caribou moss. What snow remained had been pressed firm by the wind and George could leap on the rear

of the sled, and drive the dogs in the direction the herd had taken. He handled his team very carefully, for they knew that they were on the trail of meat, and he had learned by bitter experience that if they once got beyond his control the hunt might end in failure.

The fact that the tracks were at least two weeks old did not cause George to relinquish his caution. He was now many miles beyond the point where Fred had turned homeward and furthermore the main herd might have made a large circle and returned over its old trail; or a different herd, or a wandering bull might come into view at any time. He, therefore, searched every foot of the vast horizon as the dogs pulled him steadily along. Many times he thought that he saw caribou in the distance, but each time his powerful binoculars told him that the suspicious black speck was only a boulder dropped by the glacier that, in past centuries, had ploughed its way across the hills. Two things caused him unbounded satisfaction; the wind was in his favour and the caribou were unalarmed and travelling slowly. He could tell by the multitudes of tracks that crisscrossed certain stretches of the frozen upland that the band must

have remained there feeding and resting for a day at least, and as his eager dogs would cross these stretches in less than thirty minutes, he realized that he was gaining ground rapidly.

Caribou were not the only things that interested him, however. With the responsibility of the dogs on his mind, he did not allow himself to forget the fact that every living thing that ran on four legs or flew on wings was meat for the dogs. He therefore kept his eyes open for smaller game, and before long his careful search was rewarded. As he was crossing a small ravine between two hills he saw a trail that differed from the now familiar caribou paths. As the dogs reached it they stopped, snarling, and the coarse hair on their backs stood out stiffly. It took but an instant for George to solve the mystery. The trail had been made by a pack of wolves, but while George had seen several such trails, he started with surprise as he noticed the number of tracks that formed the trail. "Whee . . . ! Baldy," he said, addressing his faithful lead-dog, "This is a real hunting pack. There must be twenty-five wolves running together. You better be careful and not stray from camp." The dogs knowing that they

were addressed wagged their bushy tails hesitatingly and whined. They knew the wolf smell well, and were anxious to be gone.

It soon became apparent that the wolves were following the caribou herd in the hope of dragging down some of the stragglers, for George crossed their trail frequently as he travelled over the frozen hills. In the late afternoon he dipped downward into a broad valley where the herd had bedded down among the willows. A careful examination told him that the tracks were not more than five days old, and delighted with his day's work, he began to think of food. If he continued on across the valley the caribou trail would lead him upward again onto the wind-swept hills.

Looking down the valley he saw some straggling groves of timber-line spruces, and against their dark masses gleamed the white of dead timber.

"Yonder's shelter and fire-wood, Baldy, what do you say to calling it a day's work and making camp?" George inquired seriously.

Baldy answered him with an eager whine and an enthusiastic wag of his tail, and patting him on the head as he passed George mounted the rear of the sled and drove the dogs downward.

The trees had held their ground against many a blizzard, and behind their dense walls of matted branches George found shelter from the cold wind. His first act was to make the sled fast to a sturdy young balsam. "Now you can't run off among the hills where the wolves will get you!" he said to the dogs as he unlaced the sled lashings.

With the aid of an axe he soon cleared a small opening among the trees. A tapering balsam lashed to two trees formed a ridge-pole for the canvas sled-cover, and when the edges of this improvised fly had been securely tied, he had a comfortable home. The balsam ends gave him a soft and springy bed, and a thick thatch of branches around the fly made the little habitation as cosy as a man could desire. When his food, sleeping-bag, and odds and ends had been neatly placed under the shelter, he sallied forth with an axe, and in a few minutes he had more than enough wood to last through the night. After cutting a few kindlings he built his fire in front of the shelter, and after filling his meat- and tea-pot with snow, he unharnessed the dogs, and tied them at intervals to a long line which he made by making the tug-line fast to the sled-rope. He then made a hole

in the snow beside each dog, and lined them with soft balsam boughs. The dogs curled up at once in their comfortable beds, and after George had hung up the dog harness and made the camp ship-shape, he sat on his sleeping-bag before the cheerful fire, and began the pleasant task of cooking his supper.

As he sat there watching the snow in the pots settle over the warm flames the realization of his loneliness swept over him. The broad valley dipped into the lowlands some two miles below him, and beyond stretched a vast blue expanse of low land, that ended some forty miles away in a wall of snow-capped mountains. Without changing his position he could see hundreds of square miles of snow-bound wilderness, and in the whole length and breadth of it, his tiny fire was the only sign of human life. George could not help thinking of what would happen to a man who was caught without food in those snow-buried forests far below him. He had begun to think of what he would do under the circumstances, when he noticed that the snow in the pots had melted, and pouring one into the other he put some more wood on the fire and began to thaw out some frozen beans and

bacon. Soon an appetizing fragrance arose on the frosty air, and a cheerful bubbling noise told him that his water was boiling. When he had made the tea he removed the pot from the flames and threw into it a handful of snow to settle the tea leaves. He had not eaten since daybreak, and all thoughts of loneliness left his mind while he satisfied his hunger. A cupful of preserved apricots finished his simple supper, and then he turned his attention to feeding the dogs. He fed them a short ration, for they were in splendid condition and he did not know what hardships the future might hold. "I'm sorry, boys," he said as he patted their furry heads, "but tomorrow I'm going to shoot something for you, and then we'll all have a tip-top feed."

He was beginning to feel the powerful bond that exists between a man and his dogs in the Northern wilderness, and he took great pains to see that they were comfortable before he left them and prepared for the night.

As he reseated himself by the fire the light went out of the sky and the distant mountains faded away into the dusk; then the night shadows crept upward from the valley, blotting the trees and

snow-fields from view until a ring of inky darkness surrounded his fire. For a while he sat in his sleeping-bag while he dried his socks and foot-gear, and when this had been done and the moccasins had been rubbed soft, he put them beside him, inside the bag, and lay back on his balsam bed. As his eyes closed, the faint howl of a timber wolf came down on the night wind from the frozen solitudes above him. "I'm glad that I'm not a caribou," was his last drowsy thought as his eyes closed and he fell into a deep sleep.

After what seemed like a few minutes' interval, George awoke. A heavy deposit of ice on the flap of his sleeping-bag showed where his breath had frozen during the long hours. Without moving he could look out over the sweep of lowlands; the distant mountains rose in a grey line against the sky, and here and there a flash of white from their summits told him that the sun was creeping over the eastern horizon.

Leaping to his feet he threw some dry shavings on the coals and as a new fire rose from the ashes he scrubbed the sleep from his eyes with handfuls of snow. While the breakfast was cooking he broke camp, and an hour later he was urging the dogs

upward towards the wind-swept home of the caribou. Then began a second day of ceaseless toil and searching that ended at last in a second valley fifteen miles to the north-eastward. In all that expanse of snow and frozen moss he failed to see a living thing. In the late afternoon the freshness of the caribou trail had promised a successful ending to his travels, but later he found the trail of the wolf pack, and he could see in the snow where the frightened herd had stampeded northward.

A year before George would have been sadly disheartened by his ill-fortune, but a season in the North had taught him that patience is the first essential to success, and that time spent in grumbling was time wasted.

"It's all a part of the game!" he said to the dogs, as he headed towards the timber-line valley that was to shelter him for his second night. He built his camp again in a grove of storm-stunted balsams, pitched his fly, and built his fire, as he had done before, but in the darkness he hitched one end of the dog-line to a small dead stump. It looked good and strong, but its roots had rotted, and when he awoke in the morning all but about

five pounds of his dog-food had disappeared. George now had a serious problem to face, but he did not tear his hair, or lose his nerve. First of all he studied the snow carefully to see just how the accident had happened, and the signs were easy to read. The dogs in moving about had exerted a strong pull on the line, and when the stump had fallen, freeing one end of their leash, Baldface, one of his wheel dogs, had been able to reach the sled, and had carried off all the meat that was within his reach. What he could not eat had been joyfully received by several of his team-mates. The result was that George found himself two days' travel from camp, with only enough dog-food for one day. A careful inventory of his other food told him that he could exist for two days on a pinch. The next question was how long the dogs could last on five pounds of meat, and striding over to the team he looked them over carefully. Now every dog knew of the theft, and they watched him guiltily, their tongues hanging out and their tails wagging placatingly. As he studied them he could not repress a grim smile. "You needn't wag your tails at me," he said gruffly, "for I know who did the stealing and who

got the meat. You, Baldface, did the stealing, and you got most of the meat, and you two, Mucluk and Kenai, got a fair share. Now, meat is meat, and you share alike, so you three robbers have got to go hungry until I kill something or we reach camp." Thus is justice administered in the far North.

An hour later George was again following the trail of the caribou herd across the uplands. After the band had stampeded it turned northward, and so, in following their trail George was delighted to find that he was making a great circle, without appreciably lengthening his distance from his home camp. His two days of ceaseless study of the trail had given him much information concerning the number of caribou in the band and the daily run of the animals composing it. His most conservative estimate placed the number of animals at five hundred head. It was a mixed herd, and their migration had ended. They were simply wandering and feeding—hunters call it "using"—on the frozen uplands.

The wolf scare had broken the herd up into a number of small bands, but George clung doggedly to the trail of the largest band. After a tramp of

five miles the small herds reunited and continued northward.

Occasionally, from the top of some high hill George could catch a glimpse of the snowy domes of the mountains that sheltered Siwash Valley, but later in the day a grey pall of clouds crept down from the north and obliterated every landmark but the nearer hills from view. With the caribou trail to lead him and his compass as a guide he felt no uneasiness, but the prospect of spending a night in the open gave him no pleasure.

As he toiled at the gee-pole, easing the sled over the rolling hills, the trail dipped into a great plain. Its surface was dotted with many lakes. The wind, however, had swept away most of the snow, and George gleefully jumped onto the sled, and let the dogs trot rapidly over the smooth surface. Wherever patches of snow covered the ice, they had held the imprint of any caribou that had passed that way, and so George, while sitting on the sled, could see in what direction the herd had moved, and his sharp command of "right" or "left" would swing the team in the proper direction. But no matter what occupied his mind, he never forgot to keep his eyes open.

When there were hills ahead of him that shortened the view, he was content to use his eyes alone, but the instant that he passed the hills, he would halt the team and search every foot of the horizon with his powerful binoculars.

As the day passed, however, the weather conditions grew steadily worse, until it was all he could do to keep the dogs from turning tail to the snow-laden gale that howled down from the Arctic. One by one the encircling hills were shrouded in the driving snow, and George was forced to draw his parka-hood close about his face, and march ahead of the dogs in order to keep from freezing. He had staggered on with his head bent to the wind for perhaps a mile, when he found himself on rising ground. A hundred yards farther brought him to deep snow, and through a rift in the storm he saw that he was in a deep pocket between two hills. Pressing forward to the lee side of a small cliff he found quiet from the gale, and then, realizing the hopelessness of picking up the caribou trail he made his preparations to ride out the storm. Fearing that the dogs would stray and become lost, he left them in harness, but they curled up into round fur-balls among the boulders, and were

soon sleeping contentedly beneath the drifting snow.

The difficulty of making a shelter was solved with the help of the sled, for after firmly lashing the sled cover over the body of the sled, he spread his sleeping-bag and crawled inside. Once covered with the warm fur, he helped himself to the last of his bannock and dried fruit, and after kicking his feet until the inside of his sleeping-bag became warm, he pulled the fur flap over his head and fell into a broken sleep. Several times during the night he was awakened by the howling of the storm, but when he had satisfied himself that daylight had not come he slept again. At last a cold light shining through the canvas told him that the day had dawned, and after a cautious parting of his protecting shelter he found that the storm had broken, and that it would be possible to travel. After the two dogs that had failed to get their share of the stolen meat had been fed, George, despite qualms to the contrary, also ate some of the raw meat. It was no time to give way to personal feelings, for there were long hard miles ahead, and a man must be well fed to keep his strength.

As George sat on the sled munching his food, he

tried to decide on what plan he should follow. There were many good excuses for his returning to his companions, and many a hardy and experienced hunter would have done so, but George decided to follow the caribou herd a few miles farther.

"They were probably held up by the storm, as I was, and I may catch up to them a few miles from here," he told himself, optimistically.

Although there was still a heavy wind blowing, and low-flying clouds still obscured the hills, he could see behind him the lake-dotted plain that he had crossed, and he now realized that he had kept too far to the left of the caribou trail and that by striking due eastward after retracing his footsteps he would in all probability find it. Everything turned out as he expected, and an hour later he had left the frozen lakes behind and was travelling steadily in pursuit of the herd. Progress was not as easy as before because the drifting snow had almost obliterated the tracks, but nevertheless he stuck doggedly to his task. Occasional glimpses of his compass told him that he was still travelling north. Now his first two days' travel had taken him due south some thirty miles from Siwash

Valley. The third day had led him east and north. He figured therefore that he was not going far out of his way, and that a long day's travel due north would take him to a point only two day's travel east of the Siwash mountains.

With his mind at rest, and his body warming under the influence of the hard travel, he jogged along hour after hour. As the day passed the storm clouds broke, and in the late afternoon a flame of sunset colours swept across the frozen land. The trail now led him upward towards a low range of hills that stretched east and west. As he neared the summit he turned the sled onto its side to anchor the dogs, and then he moved stealthily towards the crest. The first thing that he saw was a white line of hills that marked the northern horizon. As his view increased he saw more and more hills, bleak and snow-covered, but although he watched keenly for the caribou trail there was no signs of it. Instead of walking onward, therefore, he crouched and crawled towards a large boulder that was near the crest of the hill, and when he was safely ensconced behind it he raised his head slowly for a final look. Suddenly his eyes blazed with excitement as he noticed that the

HE MOVED STEALTHILY TOWARDS THE CREST.

snow was freshly torn up on some distant hills, as more and more of the country came into view, more trails and beds became visible, and he realized instantly that he had reached the spot where the herd had been during the blizzard. "They were here last night!" he gasped. And still keeping well hidden he brought out his binoculars and began to study the trail. In the valley just below him the tracks ran in every direction, and the earth and snow was pawed up where the caribou had fed, but to the right, or east, there was a rather well-defined trail, and George figured rightly that the herd had moved onward in that direction. As he followed the trail through his binoculars it finally came to an end on the sky-line of a second low range that ran northward. From his vantage point he could see some of the country beyond it, especially one rounded hill that was covered with boulders. As he focussed his glasses on this hill, his heart almost stopped beating, and he started violently—his quest was finished; he was not looking at boulders, but at scores of caribou, who were wandering slowly eastward. Good things seldom come singly, and after a second searching look through his field-glasses he almost shouted with

joy, for he could see that the land beyond the caribou herd sloped sharply downward, and dark lines of balsams stood out clearly against the fields of snow. "Meat, fire, and shelter!" he whispered joyously, "and water, too, by golly!" he added, for no liquid had passed his lips for twenty-six hours, and his throat was parched with thirst.

CHAPTER XII

AMONG THE CARIBOU

LUCKILY, George possessed to a remarkable degree the ability to think clearly in an emergency, and after a short struggle he overcame his nervousness and concentrated his whole mind on the problem that confronted him. A steady look at the distant herd convinced him that the caribou were moving north, and he realized that the few remaining hours of daylight would not give him enough time to overtake them and make a stalk.

"It's a case of one thing at a time," he told himself, "and the first thing to do is to get to the nearest timber and make camp."

Lifting the sled onto its runners, he drove the dogs eastward at a fast trot. The ridge separated him from the herd, and the steady north wind insured him against the danger of being scented.

After a rapid run of some three or four miles, he ascended the ridge and took another long look at the caribou herd. The animals were still travelling slowly northward, feeding as they went, and the main herd had split up into a dozen or more bands. Only a mile away he could see where the ridge he was on dipped downward into the timber, and hurrying back to the tired dogs he urged them onward again.

As darkness was falling he drew up in a thick grove of balsams. While the snow-water was warming and the bannocks were browning in front of the cheerful flames he fed the dogs and made a shelter, and when he crawled into his sleeping-bag he was comforted by the thought that he had done everything in his power to guard against failure. Thanks to the hard days behind him he slept the sleep of exhaustion, but by the time that the sun burst above the eastern horizon he was breasting the long slope that led to the caribou hills.

Profiting by his former experience he had tied the huskies with sticks—Indian fashion—so that they could not chew themselves free and stampede the herd, but in spite of every precaution he began to feel the agony of excitement that comes to men

whose very lives depend on their success in the hunt. The cold and hardship that he had overcome, and the lonely miles he had travelled would now be wasted if he made a single mistake in judgment, and the thought that Fred and Shorty were dependent on him added to his burden of responsibility.

According to his carefully matured plan, he was advancing towards a point that was ahead of the slowly moving herds. This was what he most desired, but he realized the dangers that confronted him and moved with the greatest caution lest he should allow the strong wind to carry his scent to some band that was hidden among the hills.

At first he followed a small valley that crossed the caribous' line of march, but as soon as he had reached the plateau, he climbed a hill, and sheltered from the bitter wind by some boulders he turned his binoculars towards the bleak hills that lay to the southward. For some time he saw no living thing except a great snowy owl that sped by on noiseless wings. As the time passed George began to have misgivings. Perhaps the herd had turned and headed east or south, or maybe a band of wolves had frightened them and scattered them

to the four winds. He knew that it was dangerous to move onward, for the wind would carry his scent over the very hills where he had seen the caribou feeding. The cold, however, began to bite so deeply that he felt the necessity of moving, so he got to his feet and started down wind. He advanced with extraordinary caution. His eyes constantly swept the miles of frozen barrens, and whenever he crossed a hill he crawled to the summit on his hands and knees, and studied each detail in the wild landscape before passing onward. He had travelled perhaps a mile in this slow and painstaking manner, and despite his efforts to the contrary was beginning to feel discouraged, when suddenly some small dark spots appeared against the dull grey sky a half a mile away.

He was crossing the swell of a low hill at the time, and without realizing what he was doing he sank slowly to the ground. Breathlessly he watched the tiny specks, for he knew that he could tell by their actions whether or not he had been seen. After what seemed to him to be an hour of suspense, the dark forms began to move over the hilltop and descend a long snow-covered slope that led towards a small range of hills that ended

two hundred yards away on his right. As he watched, other black spots appeared, and then more, until the distant crest was dark with caribou, and as they moved downward after the leaders their places were filled with the scores that followed.

"Whee. . . u!" George whispered in an agony of excitement. "I'm right bang in front of the whole herd!" His heart thumped like a trip-hammer as he wormed his way downward, and as soon as the intervening hillocks hid him from view he raced at top speed towards the small range that commanded their approach.

The crest of the highest hill was capped with a group of large boulders left there by some glacier in the distant past, and when his cautious approach had brought him to this natural barrier he found that he could see the whole of the great expanse of snow and frozen earth over which the army of caribou were advancing. For the time at least, George allowed nothing to interfere with his final preparations. First he closely examined the sights on his rifle, for a slight knock against a boulder may cause the most accurate firearm to shoot wide of its mark. Then, satisfied, he opened

the breach of his rifle and blew through it, lest in his stalk it had become choked with snow, and a broken barrel might result. He next looked to the lacings of his moccasins, and placed his binoculars in the pocket of his shirt, for he must be ready to run over ice and rock at breakneck speed. His lips were bleeding where the touch of the cold steel had torn the skin, but he was insensible to pain.

There is no sight that is more fascinating than the sight of a herd of wild animals moving easily and confidently across the hills of an untrammelled wilderness, and as George watched them his body quivered to the waves of emotion that swept through his mind. In a flash his brain pictured the changes that time had brought. When the caribou were young on the earth, his ancestors had been the weakest of the animals, and animal-like they had followed the herds of prehistoric caribou. And here were the caribou herds tramping towards him, unchanged through the centuries, while man had become the ruler of the earth.

The approach of the band soon drove these thoughts from his mind, and he crouched lower among the rocks. No timber-wolf ever watched

his approaching prey with more eagerness than he, and his worn clothes and white parka blended into the boulders and drifted snow so perfectly that it would have taken sharper eyes than the caribou possessed to discover him.

An old cow caribou led the monster band. Thirty times had she swum the mighty Yukon since the day in June fifteen years before when she had first seen the light of day in the Northern barrens. Each year had the migration of her people swept southward across the mighty river to their wintering grounds, and then northward under the spring sun to the summer ranges on the edge of the Arctic. During the early years she had followed her mother and from her she had learned the first lessons in her struggle for life. It was her mother who had taught her to fear the acrid smell of wood smoke, to respect the lightning rush of the clumsy looking grizzlies that followed the mountain-sides, and to flee blindly when the hunger call of the wolf packs echoed among the hills. In the years that followed she had seen her brothers fall before the dull reports of the Hudson Bay flint-locks in the hands of Indian hunters, and later she had learned to fear the sharp, spiteful crack of

smokeless powder that came with the men who searched for gold.

But she possessed one trait that raised her far above her fellows—she lacked the curiosity of her kind. When the wind brought a taint of danger, or she heard the report of firearms, she would dash away at a frantic gallop that would later settle down into a steady trot that would soon leave the danger miles behind. As her knowledge increased, the other cows began to follow her lead, until at last, even the heavy antlered, white-necked bulls treated her with a kind of surly respect. And so, as the years went by, the old cow's rule became recognized, and every year when the mating season was over and the different herds parted and went to their favourite winter ranges, a larger number would follow in her trail. The increase in the herd necessitated in time a larger feeding ground, and it was here that the old cow showed her greatness as a leader. How she followed the unknown wilderness trails eastward no one knows; perhaps the south wind carried the scent of vast feeding grounds, or the wild geese that nested in the summer barrens told her, but the fact remains that on the next year's migration she left the old trails and

struck out towards the unknown ranges that lay south-east of the Tanana. Only the hardiest of the herd followed her, and their hardihood was well rewarded when they found themselves in the vast stretch of rolling caribou hills that have since then become their winter home.

When the winter had passed and the scattered bands at last gathered in the far Northern barrens, many of them bore signs of suffering. The inrushing gold hunters had pre-empted many of their best ranges, and their ranks had been depleted by long-range, high-power rifles. Only the old cow's herd had returned unscathed, and so, in the following year her band swelled to more than a thousand head.

Once on the feeding grounds the separate bands would scatter, for these vast uplands had never echoed to the report of a rifle, and although Nabesna Charlie had shot a few stragglers that wandered too close to the Siwash Valley,no other man, red or white, had ever penetrated the stark solitudes that guarded their retreat.

As George watched them his eyes gleamed with surprise at their numbers. Here were hundreds of old cows, scarred and grizzled by many a long

migration; droves of young cows with sleek coats and gentle eyes; rangy calves who had never seen a spring thaw, and sturdy young stags who, although they were not yet old enough to run with the great, white-necked herd-bulls, were forever bickering and interfering with the orderly progress of the herd. Had they known anything they would have followed the old cow who, noting the dangerous boulders on the low hill, turned instinctively and gave them a wide berth, but several young bulls blunderd onward towards the suspicious hill, and a large part of the herd followed. As the head of the line reached the hill they turned and followed its base, and so it happened that a long line of caribou began to circle just below the rocks where George was crouching. They were so close that he could hear their feet scuffling in the crusted snow, and see their nostrils twitching to catch any taint of danger that the icy wind might bring. The precaution was instinctive, for the animals felt absolutely safe on the bleak hills, but as they moved contentedly along, a shiny steel barrel slid into view between the grey rocks, and then the crash of thunder rolled out across the wilderness.

For an instant every caribou in the great herd stood as if carved out of marble, and then suddenly the dry snow arose in clouds and the hills echoed to the clatter of flying hoofs. The snow clouds sped southward, led by the old cow, but six young bulls lay quiet on the frozen plain—their last migration was finished.

George sat on the crest of the hill, and watched the great band as it faded from view over the southern hills. He was very happy, and for the first time in four days he allowed himself the luxury of a minute's rest. He knew that while his hunt was successful his labours had only begun, for many sled loads of caribou meat were lying in the snow below him, and there was many a weary mile of sledding between him and Siwash Valley.

The cold wind soon stirred George to action, and after cleaning his rifle, he moved down the slope. First, he examined the carcasses in order to ascertain their weight. The proposition that confronted him was one that would tax the skill and resources of the most experienced dog driver. The carcass of a large animal such as a caribou is difficult to handle under the best circumstances, and at first he was discouraged by the difficulties

that confronted him. Fortunately his sense of humour came to his aid, and he laughed aloud.

"For the last week I've been kicking because I couldn't find meat, and now that I've got it I begin to worry about how I can haul it!" he chuckled. "Now if Dan Draper was here," he continued, "he'd begin at the beginning and not worry about his troubles until he came to them."

George knew that the care of the meat was his first duty, and without further hesitation he took out his skinning knife and went to work. He had been busy for perhaps an hour, when the howl of a wolf echoed across the bleak hills. The sinister sound brought George's thoughts back to earth, for it was the gathering call of the leader, and it was answered by fainter howls farther away among the hills. Knowing that with wolves about it would be unsafe to leave the meat for any length of time, he decided to return at once and bring up his camp. This would necessitate the hauling of firewood, but he figured that when the camp had been brought up it would serve to keep the wolves at bay while he returned to timber-line for a supply of fuel.

Then began the strangest journey that George

had ever experienced. By day he advanced his meat in relays, by night he slept on the frozen plain. Not once, during the week that he struggled westward, did the temperature rise above zero, and on two occasions he was forced to seek shelter from ice-laden gales that screamed down from the Arctic.

On clear days he would stop at times on some commanding hill and let his eyes sweep across the wilderness that stretched about him like a white sea. Once he caught a glimpse of a gigantic ice-mantled peak that towered above the northern ranges. Even with his lack of experience in judging heights he felt that the peak must be more than twenty thousand feet high, but little did he realize that under the inadequate name of McKinley his mountain would some day be known as the highest mountain in North America. These glimpses of mighty mountains and unknown vastnesses stirred him with a longing to unravel the mysteries of this great land, and it was with a feeling that he would return and see it all again, that he struggled westward towards the Siwash Mountains.

On the third morning of his homeward trip

a wonderful experience befell him. The sun had risen in a flawless sky, and the snow sparkled like diamonds where the sun touched it. George was driving the dogs across a lake that was frozen to its very bottom. For the time being he sat on top of the sled load and contentedly watched the white landscape glide by. Suddenly he saw a band of caribou appear on the summit of a southern hill. They were coming towards him, and for an instant habit was stronger than reason, and he reached for his rifle, but the feel of the cold steel brought him to his senses and he realized with a feeling of relief that his hunting was finished, and that he had all the meat he could use.

As he watched the animals drifting toward him, a second band came into view against the sky, and a third began to wind downward between two hills farther to the east. As the morning passed, herd after herd came up from the south until the hills were black with them. They were moving slowly northward, feeding as they went, and when the massed herds began to cross George's line of march the dogs made frantic efforts to give chase. By throwing the sled on its side and sitting on the load, he soon cooled their ardour, and, strange to

relate, they became accustomed to the caribou in time, and trotted along quietly, although the wolfish gleam in their eyes told George that he must be watchful.

The caribou, too, were a party to the strange truce. At first the nearer herds had stampeded at sight of the dogs, but when they saw that the sled was moving onward steadily, without turning to the right or left, they would merely trot a short distance to one side and stand there, watching with wide-eyed curiosity until the team had passed. For three days, George relayed back and forth in the path of the herd, and it was not until he was close to the Siwash Mountains that their numbers began to decrease. In time he became so accustomed to having the animals about him that he went about his work without giving them a thought.

It was during these days that George became aware of a temptation that many a meat hunter has surrendered to. At almost any hour of the day he could have saved himself the work of going back for the rest of the caribou that he had killed, by the simple expedient of killing others, but the thought of leaving any of the splendid

animals to rot, or be eaten by wolves, was so repugnant to him, that he dismissed the idea with disgust.

The sight of such numbers of wild creatures was a new experience to George. He began to appreciate for the first time that it was the presence of these very animals that made it possible for men such as he to exist and carry on their labours in the Alaskan wilds. Of a sudden the protection of the game herds became a vital thing to him: he thought of the extermination of the buffalo; the slaughter of unnumbered thousands of elk, that men might wear their teeth for baubles; the warehouses of south-eastern Alaska that groaned under their weight of deer hides while the meat was left to rot, and he marvelled at the criminal stupidity of man.

While George was becoming familiar with the lives of the caribou, he was having a hard struggle with the savage cold of the northern barrens. By removing the skin of one of the largest bulls he secured a splendid frost-proof mattress to sleep on, but no one who has not travelled over frozen wastes for days can appreciate the vital need of a fire. The craving for food that comes to a hungry

man is no stronger than the longing for a fire that comes to one who has slept for days on snow and frozen earth. The cold of the Northland is a terrible enemy. By day the icy winds sweep across the land, and if a hand or a cheek is exposed it instantly feels the burn of the frost; at night the breath of ice follows the traveller into his sleeping-bag and stabs him with its frosty daggers—there is no escape from it. The human body gives off far more moisture than we realize, and when there is no fire, clothes and sleeping-bags become impregnated with frost. At first George had suffered cruelly, but in time he learned to turn his sleeping-bag inside out during the day, and when the moisture had frozen he would brush it from the soft fur as you would brush dust from a rug. Despite his care he would have had difficulty in sleeping had he not learned that by constant movement he could defeat the cold. In the daytime he travelled constantly, and at night, if he was chilled, he would kick his feet violently and exercise his body until the sleeping-bag became warm.

It was with a feeling of the deepest thankfulness, therefore, that George pitched his fly in the timber

that clung to the base of the Siwash Mountains. The heat of a spruce-wood fire radiated from his little shelter, and from his soft bed of balsam boughs he looked contentedly at the dogs who had gathered in a half-circle about the leaping flames. Their long shadows stretched like the spokes of a giant wheel across the crimson snow, while from the background the wall of snow-laden evergreens threw back the echoes of the crackling logs.

As he watched his wolf-like team beyond his fire he began to think of his companions, and for the first time in many days a feeling of loneliness swept over him. With it came the fear that some accident might have befallen them. No one knows better than the wilderness man how great the dangers are that surround him, and George had to rouse himself and throw wood on the fire to dispel the sinister thoughts that tormented him. He was sorely tempted to cache most of the caribou meat and strike with all speed for his camp, but his pride came to his rescue and he made up his mind that he would not rest until the last pound of meat was safely in camp in the Siwash Valley.

CHAPTER XIII

PROSPECTOR'S LUCK

WHEN George disappeared among the frozen hills of the caribou country, Fred and Shorty settled down to the task of finding where the gold deposit came from.

Although they were seriously handicapped by the responsibility of the injured Indian, they made a new camp about two miles above the spot where the Indian had been digging gold, and each day one of them would make a trip to the Indian's camp with enough cooked food to last him until the next visit.

Nabesna Charlie was improving steadily, and although he could not move about, he was soon able to do many useful things with his hands. In being helpful, however, the Indian seemed to act purely from his sense of duty. Never by word,

or look, did he suggest a feeling of appreciation for what the white men had done for him. At first Fred resented the fact, but at last he accepted Shorty's ideas concerning Indians.

"Injuns is Siwashes, and Siwashes is Injuns. They aint *folks* like you and me." Thus Shorty would explain away all of Fred's complaints of Charlie's stoicism.

On the morning after they had pitched their new camp, they started out before sunrise to follow up the stream on which Nabesna Charlie had found gold. It was bitterly cold. For the first hour Shorty broke trail, and when at last he stepped aside to let Fred take a turn, he said: "This cold snap is goin' to be hard on George. We're sheltered in here among the hills and yet I'll bet its thirty below zero this minute. Out there in the caribou hills it'll run colder than it does here."

Fred said nothing. He was saving his wind for the hard work of breaking trail, for despite his long Indian snow-shoes he sank fully six inches into the soft snow at every step. From long habit he travelled in as straight a line as possible, for he knew that they might want to travel the trail later with their dog-sleds.

Shorty's plan was a simple one. He reasoned that as the stream carried a moderate quantity of gold at the point where Nabesna Charlie had been working, it might be richer at some point closer to its headwaters. He and Fred therefore had decided to make a careful search of the river until they found the most promising point, and then to camp there and sink some experimental holes to bed rock.

At first they could see nothing but the dim snow-covered river bed winding between the wooded banks, but as the sun rose the world about them turned to a gleaming whiteness. For about three miles the valley was narrow, and rounded hummocks of snow in the stream-bed told them there were many boulders there. This was not to their liking, for boulders add greatly to the difficulty of mining, and they hoped that farther on the character of the stream might change.

At last their hopes seemed gratified, for the mountain walls drew apart and they found themselves in a wild amphitheatre among snow-covered hills. Several deep valleys leading down to the floor of the amphitheatre formed the headwaters of the stream. They could see that there was little

use in going farther, so they took a tramp around the circular valley in order to choose the best camping spot. A thick growth of straight young spruces that grew close to the river proved to be the most sheltered spot, and after a bite of cold meat and bread they started homeward.

Shorty was hopeful about their finding gold. "That deep valley ought to hold any gold that comes down from the mountains, and I've got a hunch that we'll find somethin'," he said as they swung along. "But the thing that worries me," he added, "is that George may git down-hearted and come back if he don't run into game in a few days."

"You needn't be afraid of that," Fred replied, "he'll keep plugging ahead until his meat is gone. The only worry I have is that he may not have enough grub to last him until he finds game."

Their next worry was in regard to Nabesna Charlie. Their change of camp would necessitate their taking the Indian with them, for they would be too far away for a daily visit. Indians are notoriously improvident with food, and they realized that they might have difficulty in making Charlie conform to the small ration that their lack

of meat necessitated. While they were preparing their own and Charlie's supper Shorty took an inventory of their entire food supply, and his final remarks were not encouraging.

"We've got enough flour, beans, bacon, and sugar to last three men one month and a half, and it'll be four months, anyway, before we can smell salt water. Now when George gits back we'll have him and the dogs to feed in addition to Nabesna Charlie, so you kin see that we've sure got some exhileratin' days ahead of us."

After supper they donned their snow-shoes and tramped down to the Indian's camp, and while he was eating his frugal meal they told him of their scarcity of food. To their surprise Nabesna Charlie approved of their plans.

"Me hunt alone long taime—me savey grub go quick. George no ketchum caribou, we ketchum bad taime," he said, as he scraped the last vestige of food from the kettle. He was able to help them too, in breaking up his camp, and when the tent and odds and ends were loaded onto his light basket sled he stretched himself full length on top in order to distribute his weight evenly.

The load, including the Indian, weighed about

225 pounds, and Fred and Shorty had no difficulty in pulling it over the hard packed trail.

Although Fred had often had to pull loaded sleds short distances, he had never before settled down to such a long pull, and by the time they had covered a mile he began to marvel at the strength of the Alaskan dog.

"It's hard to realize that three ordinary huskies could yank this sled along faster than you and me," he said to Shorty as they plodded onward with bowed heads.

"You bet it is!" Shorty answered. "'Jerk-neckin'' a sled, as the sour-doughs call it, is one of the hardest jobs that this country supplies—and that's goin' some! And yet there's many a feller along the Alaska trails that's pulled sleds this way fer hundreds of miles."

As Shorty relapsed into silence, Fred's thoughts turned to the unknown men who had laboured like Titans in the Northern wilderness. Perhaps one in twenty had struck it rich—the rest, struggling manfully to the last, had succumbed to the forces of nature. Fred was of a very optimistic temperament, but as he realized the tremendous odds against him, he was almost discouraged. He

wondered how Shorty felt about it all, and at last he decided to ask him.

"Shorty," he began, "how do you feel about all this—*mushing* through the snow, hauling sick Indians on sleds, and going hungry just for the chance of finding some gold?" Shorty was so surprised at Fred's question that he stopped still in his tracks, and after a moment's silence he said: "Fred, old horse, you need a change—somethin' simple—this here diet of ours is too rich for you!"

"No it isn't, Shorty," Fred laughed. "I want to know how you feel about hunting for gold all your life, and may be—not finding it."

This time Shorty was serious, and as they pulled the sled forward once more he spoke in words that Fred never forgot. "You're young, Fred, or I wouldn't say what I'm goin' to," he began. "If you was a old malemute like me you'd have nothin' to learn, but what I'm goin' to tell you may help you some. In the first place you're wrong about the gold—every man who hunts long and hard finds it. But there ain't one man in fifty who knows how to keep it. Look at me now—would you think I'd ever struck it rich? Well, I did—

twice. I took thirty thousand dollars out o' the Caribou Country, and twenty thousand out o' the Nome Beach. What I have left wouldn't hurt you if you got it in your eye. That's where I made my mistake.

"Now, havin' struck it rich taught me one thing that was worth all the gold, and that is that havin' gold don't make a feller rich. A man kin have a million iron dollars in his celler and be the poorest feller in creation.

"You see, Fred, you can't take even a ounce o' gold dust with you when you 'cross the big divide' —it's in forgettin' that fact that fellers fall down. Just look at us now—if we had four more sacks o' flour, fifty pounds o' bacon, fifty pounds o' beans, and a dozen cans o' maple syrup, we'd be happy and quit worryin' wouldn't we?"

"You bet we would!" Fred laughed.

"Well, now, s'pose we had on top o' that fifty sacks o' flour and ten tons o' beans and bacon and syrup, would we be any better off?"

"Well—I guess not," Fred answered dubiously.

"You guess right," Shorty laughed, "and what's more, we would be worse off, cause we'd have all that extry grub to worry about. Now that's

what bein' rich is like. Money kin only buy you grub, clothes, and shelter—it can't buy strength, or self-respect, or health, or friends, or anythin' that is worth while—like bein' contented.

"Now this is what I'm headin' for—when you git down on yer feed and things look bad, don't stay around camp and kick about things—git out an' rustle, and when yer blood gits to poundin' and yer lungs is full of fresh air ye'll fergit all about yer troubles and feel like a white man agin."

Fred was almost convinced by Shorty's homely words, in fact he was beginning to feel ashamed of himself. But he suddenly remembered the dark outlook in regard to food, and he asked Shorty one more question.

"What you say about not worrying is good advice, Shorty, but you were worrying this morning about our supply of grub, weren't you?"

"No, I warn't worryin' none, in the way you mean. I was thinkin' and plannin' about grub, but that's a heap different from being scairt about it. When you and Dan Draper and George got out o' grub in the Kachiltna Mountains none of yer sat down and cried about it, did yer?"

"No," Fred replied. "But that was different—

we were on the move then—not sitting still in one place."

"There, ye've hit the nail on the head!" Shorty cried, triumphantly. "It's the *sittin' still* that gits on yer nerves, so remember it and ye'll have learned one of the things that every old sour-dough knows."

A few minutes later they reached camp, and Fred whistled cheerfully as he prepared their food. His talk with Shorty had opened his eyes to some of the really important things of life, and for the first time he understood the brave spirit that animates the men of the North.

The days that followed were full of hard work, but Fred had learned his lesson and he welcomed every task that came his way. Nabesna Charlie gained in strength rapidly, and while Shorty and Fred moved their belongings into the upper valley, Charlie cooked, and did the odd jobs about camp. Such things as they needed were soon moved to the scene of their coming labours and after the extra food and duffel were securely cached they made their last trip, hauling Charlie on the sled as they had before.

Then began their real labours—the search for

gold. The stream that entered the valley swept around a steep bluff from which it ran straight out into the centre of the valley. It then turned and continued down the centre of the amphitheatre between its steep spruce-covered banks. Fred, if left to himself, would have sunk a hole as close to the stream as possible, under the impression that the gold would follow the river channel. Shorty, however, explained that gold was heavy and moved in a straighter line than did water. "And besides that," he continued, "these stream beds change from year to year. Today the stream is in the middle of this here valley, but come next spring she might 'a' moved some."

He therefore chose a spot between the bluff and the stream where they were certain to find at least an indication of gold if any was to be found there. While Fred was shovelling away the snow, Shorty chopped firewood and before long a great fire was crackling over the frozen earth. While the fire was thawing the earth to a point where they could dig it out, they returned to the camp and began to put it in order, and during the week that followed they grew used to this tedious round of duties. After each fire they could remove about

a foot of earth, and by this slow method they forced their shaft towards bed rock.

After seven days had passed without a sign from George, even Shorty's usually cheerful countenance wore a serious expression. They had done everything that lay within their power to conserve their food supply, but with the exception of a few ptarmigans and an occasional snow-shoe rabbit, there was no game in the region. Once Fred put in a long day looking for sheep on the wind-swept crests of the hills that rose about them, but not even a track could he find, and Nabesna Charlie's statement that the sheep wintered in the higher mountains farther westward was verified. But he never forgot the experience, for the long hours that he spent in the icy coldness of the mountain tops were a new experience to him, and the grand views out over the grim snow-covered wilderness made him stop and hold his breath in awe. Once, from the top of the highest mountain in the range he got a view of the interminable sweep of the caribou country as it stretched away like a frozen sea to the eastward. The coldness and utter loneliness of that grim land made him fear for George's safety, and the disquieting thoughts of dangers that might

have overtaken him remained in his mind for hours afterward.

Two days later the impossible happened: every ptarmigan in the valley disappeared. At first they did not think much about it, but when the second and third day went by without a sign of these beautiful birds they began to take the matter seriously. Scarcely a day had gone by since they first entered Siwash Valley that ptarmigan, either roasted in their little oven, or stewed with rice, had not formed a portion of their bill of fare, and now that the birds had gone they began to appreciate how important this meat supply had been. Nabesna Charlie, who was beginning to move about a little, tried valiantly to fill the breach with rabbits which he snared among the willow groves. The rabbits were scarce, however, and in a few days the last one stepped into one of Charlie's snares, and was converted into a stew.

After that Shorty dug in the frozen earth alone, and Fred spent his entire time tramping among the hills in search of game. Despite the long snowy miles that he tramped he returned empty handed. A large number of lynxes working slowly upward from the timbered lowlands had reached the Siwash

Mountains, and in a few nights the rabbits had been either killed or driven terrified into the dense thickets. Fred noticed the lynx tracks along the stream beds; he noticed too the decrease in the number of rabbit tracks, and he soon arrived at the conclusion that they could not kill enough rabbits to eke out their food supply.

The three men no longer talked or joked in their tent at nightfall, for even Nabesna Charlie had begun to realize the seriousness of their predicament. The one subject of overwhelming importance was George. Ten days had passed since he waved them a cheerful good-bye and disappeared into the frozen mysteries of the great plateau. They well knew what those ten days might bring to him, for death stalked the wilderness in many disguises, and even the strongest and wisest of men can be vanquished by ill fortune. Since the first week of George's absence had passed, their fear for his safety had reached a point where they could not bear to talk about him, and so they turned naturally enough to the absorbing topic of the scarcity of game. As Shorty, like Nabesna Charlie, had spent most of his life in the wilderness, they had gathered an unusual store of first-hand

knowledge concerning the wild creatures. As was natural, the Indian's stories were hopelessly mixed up with the supernatural folk-lore tales of his tribe, but what they lacked in scientific exactness they made up in interest.

When he spoke about the animals that he had hunted or trapped he showed a remarkable insight into their daily lives. But as soon as he talked about things that he had not seen in person, he would become hopelessly confused. He told them that the wild fowl buried themselves in the mud during the long winters, and that there was a species of fish in the mountain lakes that was so large that it swallowed caribou alive, and he said that the towering snowfields of the higher mountains were haunted by evil spirits who would kill any one who dared to trespass on their domain. He attributed the injury from which he was recovering to the fact that he had incurred the enmity of some evil spirit.

Fred was tempted to smile at these fantastic tales, but Shorty warned him that the Indians were extremely sensitive concerning their beliefs, and after that Fred would listen to Charlie's wildest stories with a serious countenance. Shorty,

on the other hand, looked on everything that moved with a humorous eye. While his experience was in every way as full as that of Nabesna Charlie, and while he far surpassed his dusky brother in the ability to reason, all his stories of the wilderness reflected his humorous outlook on life.

Fred's sides would ache from laughter after an evening spent in listening to Shorty's tales, and for the time at least he would forget his fears concerning George.

The time soon came, however, when nothing could hide the seriousness of their position. Two weeks had passed without a word from George, and they knew that the time to act had come. Their decision came on the heels of a great disappointment, for the shaft that they had sunk with such patience and labour had proved to be a failure. Scarcely one grain of gold did they find when their shovels reached bed-rock, and giving up all thoughts of further prospecting, they returned to their tent and began their preparations for finding George. Having no dogs they could only take such necessities as they could carry, and while they were preparing the food that was to carry them across the caribou hills they made their

plans. Fred was to strike due south in order to intercept George's trail, while Shorty was to go east. Each of them was to make a great circle among the hills and they were not to return until George was found, or their food gave out. Charlie was to keep camp, and in case their search was unsuccessful they were to strike over their back trail and attempt to get meat with which they could continue their search.

At last everything was ready for their arduous journey, and realizing the hard work that awaited them they crawled into their sleeping-bags. Contrary to Fred's usual habit, he could not sleep. His mind was filled with fears for George and he lay with wide-open eyes staring through the darkness. Outside the night was bitterly cold, and he shuddered as he thought of the frozen wastes that lay to the eastward. He had no way of telling how long he had lain there thinking, but as he turned on his side in an attempt to sleep, something made him start to a sitting position. For a minute he strained his ears to catch a repetition of the sound that had startled him, and then he rose noiselessly to his feet. He had heard something moving in the snow above their camp.

The thought that almost made his heart stop beating was that it might be George. But on second thought he decided that George would approach from down stream as their old trail lay in that direction. The next thought was that it might be big game, a moose or caribou that was travelling down the valley. As he was fully dressed and his feet well protected with a pair of sleeping moccasins, he lost no time in picking up his rifle and leaving the tent. With the icy coldness of the night air filling his lungs, he moved stealthily along the trail that followed the creek bed towards the shaft they had been digging. His moccasins made no noise on the packed snow, and before he had moved far he heard something advancing beyond a timbered point ahead of him. Despite the darkness he could see the dark bulk of the trees, and sinking on one knee he brought up his rifle and waited. An instant later a figure rounded the point and then another and another. He took a steady aim along the barrel and was about to pull the trigger when a cheery whistle came through the darkness, and as he jumped to his feet he was greeted by the barking of dogs. For an instant he was too overcome to move, and

then finding his voice he called: "George! is that you?"

For an instant the dark figures came to a halt, and then George's cheery voice answered, "Not on your life! I'm the delivery boy from the corner grocery!"

CHAPTER XIV

"THE BIG BREAK-UP"

TO describe the joy that filled the tent that night would take far too much space. First, George told them how he had cut across a pass in the mountains instead of making a wide detour to reach Siwash Valley, and how he had seen the smoke of their new camp from the top of the pass, and pushed on until darkness had fallen. Then, to the accompaniment of a chorus of howls from the dogs, they hung up the two caribou that were on George's sled, and when they heard that there were still four more carcasses at the head of the valley, the spruce-trees echoed to their joyful shouts. Even Nabesna Charlie lost his dignified bearing, and smiled from ear to ear as he said, "George you all same big chief—you savy ketchum hy-iu grub!"

Then came a feast that lasted until the rays of

the rising sun flashed on the snow summits of the Siwash Mountains. While the caribou steaks were sizzling on the fire, George began his story, and when the simply told tale of hardship was finished he added, "You see, I had to keep after the caribou until I got them, for I knew that you fellows were up against it."

Shorty, for once, was serious, and laying his hand on George's shoulder he said, "George, I've had many a pardner but as long as you say the word, I'll 'break trail' for you."

There was so much to talk about that they could have gone without any sleep, but they knew that their work would be incomplete until they had brought in the rest of the caribou, and after feeding the faithful dogs they were soon asleep.

The days that followed were happy ones. With every worry removed from their minds, they joyfully took up the work of moving their camp. They had no special plans for the future, but they knew that they would be forced to move towards the coast with the coming of spring, and so they began by relaying their supplies of meat towards the lowlands. Instead of returning down the stream that ran through the gameless country,

they followed a tributary valley westward. Being in no hurry they took their time, and the boys made many a scouting trip into the surrounding wilderness while Shorty and Nabesna Charlie advanced their camp. It was during one of these side explorations that George found a spot that they called ever afterward—"The Happy Hunting Ground." Crossing a low divide on the heels of a blizzard he stumbled onto a valley that was the favourite wintering ground of the wild creatures in that part of the great wilderness.

In the first hour following his discovery he found scores of fox tracks; hundreds of marten trails; a broad-beaten moose-yard, and a lake whose frozen surface was dotted with the white domes of beaver-houses. Wild with excitement at what he had seen, he turned and raced campward.

The following day they moved up their entire outfit and pitched their tent on the edge of the game-trampled valley, and even Nabesna Charlie will never forget the exciting days that followed. Following the setting of a line of traps a steady stream of splendid furs came into their camp. Within a radius of five miles were three well-populated moose-yards; thousands of ptarmigans

were to be found among the willow thickets, and the cold waters of the lakes were alive with whitefish and trout.

At first they could hardly believe their good fortune, but as one thrilling day followed another they accepted the bounties of nature with thankful hearts. Being thoroughly experienced in the ways of the wild they were never wasteful, and they took every precaution, no matter how slight, to keep the game that surrounded them from becoming frightened. Their camp was situated beneath the low divide that led to the valley, and they never crossed it except to visit their traps.

In comparison with the hard grind of the trail their life was an easy one, but compared with civilized standards it abounded in toil and effort. As Shorty and Nabesna Charlie were willing to manage the camp, the boys took gladly to their snow-shoes and lived in the open, and scarcely a day passed when they did not go far afield, exploring and ransacking their great domain. At nightfall they would return with their minds full of wilderness lore, and after they had eaten they would rest contentedly on their sleeping-bags and talk, while Nabesna Charlie would work on a

caribou skin, or Shorty would trim a parka with wolverine fur. Every day was a long-drawn-out adventure, and many a thrilling tale was told and many a wilderness riddle was solved in the cheerful warmth of their evening fire. It was there that they heard how Baldy had saved Fred when he tripped and fell in the snow and was charged by an angry moose; how George outwitted the huge black leader of a wolf pack; how they killed the arch fiend of the wolverine tribe, and caught the black fox that lived on the edge of the caribou hills.

It was not strange, then, that the days stretched into months without their realizing it, and it was not until the pelts of the wild things began to grow ragged that they awoke to the fact that winter had passed. Up to this time there had been no hint of a change in the seasons. Outside of the fact that the sun was creeping steadily northward, and that the days were growing longer, there was nothing to suggest that winter had broken. But now, almost imperceptibly, a change had come over the whole great land.

The ptarmigan noticed it first, and from the willows bordering the streams came the raucous

mating song of the cocks. Then the cold grey of the winter sky turned to a milder blue, and at noon the snow grew soft under their snow-shoes. The last sign was warning enough, for when the spring thaw is at its height travel is next to impossible, and without wasting a moment they broke camp and prepared for the long trail. Meat they had in plenty, for in view of their long journey they had taken moderate toll of the moose-yards, and now, as they turned their backs on the camp where they had been so happy, they put all regrets behind them and faced with eagerness the hardships that the future might bring.

Instead of interfering with their travel, the beginning of the thaw was a help, for at night the melted snow froze into a hard crust, and by sledding in the dark hours, they made splendid time. In the daytime they slept or rested with their tent wide open to the sunshine. They worked hard, for the snow on the hillsides that sloped south was beginning to settle, and they knew that before long the streams would break their bonds and their sleds would be useless.

The care of the meat was their first considera-

tion, as they were counting on it to carry them to the sea coast, but just when they were beginning to worry, George stumbled on an ice-encrusted cave, under an overhanging ledge of rock some ten miles below their camp, and in three long relays they had it safely stored in the natural ice-chest. Then, pushing forward rapidly, they dropped down into the great valley and pitched their tent beside their old *cache* on the banks of the unnamed river.

Thanks to the good care that he had received, Nabesna Charlie had almost regained his former strength and, while the others were bringing up the last of their outfit, he smoke-dried the meat and kept the camp in order.

Their labours were completed in the nick of time. For some days they had noticed the gradual softening of the ice and,—what was even more convincing—the sound of running water. Before long the whole land echoed to it. From every bank and hillside came the silvery tinkle of falling drops, and in the gullies and valleys the tiny sounds swelled into a glad song of awakening. Even the mountains had a spring song, for during the heat of the day avalanches swept over their

rugged cliffs, and the echoes rumbled along the horizon like the grumbling of summer thunder. Soon bare ground appeared in the sunniest spots and around the tree trunks, and as the exposed earth held the warmth of the sun, the snow melted more rapidly.

They were now watching the annual victory of heat over cold, and as the season changed, so was their entire method of travel to change. Hitherto the dogs had been the most valuable part of their equipment, but now that they were to travel by water the dogs were not only useless but were becoming a source of grave responsibility. Shorty put their feelings into words when he said: "Those huskies have worked for us and now we've got to work for them, but all the same I wish that they'd hibernate in summer-time the same as grizzlies do in the winter!"

Even Nabesna Charlie caught enough of his meaning to join in the laughter that followed. "Injun turn him loose—he ketchum grub all same wolf," he suggested.

"It may be all right to turn 'em loose when you've got a reg'ler camp so they kin go off and hunt, but we'll be travellin' soon and we've got to

keep 'em close to camp so we kin move quick," Shorty answered.

It was at the end of a warm spring night that the party was awakened by a strange sound that seemed to come from the river. Before the boys could ask what it was, Shorty had sprung from his sleeping-bag with a glad shout: "It's the 'Spring Break-up'! Tumble out, you fellers!"

Rubbing the sleep from their eyes they ran after him to the river bank, and for hours afterward they sat spellbound, watching the great Drama of the Northland. The first thing that they saw was a wall of slushy water that came sweeping downward from the river that drained the Kachiltna glaciers. Tossing here and there, on the rapidly rising flood, were blocks of clear ice that glistened like gems under the pale dawn. An hour later an answering murmur came from the headwaters of the main river, and as the rotten ice sagged away the long-imprisoned water surged into view with a triumphant rush. Soon the stream that came from the Siwash Mountains added its ice-laden flood to the wild waters of the big river, and the massed floes began to form a dam in a narrow stretch below their camp. As

ton after ton of new ice was crushed against the barrier, the black flood began to rise in sullen silence, as if conscious of its new-born power. The men on the bank were dumb with pent-up emotion as they watched the battle of the mighty forces. They knew that the end must come soon, for the ice-wall was groaning and cracking in its mighty effort to stem the flood; but it was a losing fight. The forces of Nature were irresistible. A bulge began to appear in the centre of the dam, several sharp reports followed, and then with a deafening roar the mighty structure thundered downward in a smother of foam. As the massed-up tons of ice swept the banks they carried everything before them. Gnarled spruces and towering cottonwood-trees, that had withstood the strength of a thousand storms, were torn from the earth like wisps of grass, and when the waters had fallen, the edge of the forest was cut down as cleanly as if a giant knife had passed across it.

For a long time the watchers sat by the river too overcome by what they had seen to speak. It was Nabesna Charlie who finally broke the silence.

"Ice him plenty skookum,[1] but water hyas[2]

[1] Strong. [2] Extreme.

skookum," he said, pointing to the wild waters that swept seaward.

The boys nodded in silent agreement, and then Fred said: "It's the 'Big Break-up,' George; we've seen the seasons around, at last!"

"Jumpin' grizzly bears!" Shorty yelled, as he scrambled to his feet, "I jest knowed I'd forgot sumthin'."

He had reached the water's edge before the boys knew what he was about, and the next instant he had sprayed them with a hatful of ice-cold water. Roaring with laughter at their surprise, he held out his gnarled hand, saying, "Shake, pardners! Ye're no longer Cheechawkers, but the real stuff—ye're out an' out Sour-doughs now!"

In a flash the boys remembered the old Alaskan saying that a man is a tender-foot until he has seen the freeze and break-up of the Northern rivers, and, grinning with amusement at Shorty's initiation, they shook his hand until his shoulder ached.

CHAPTER XV

RUNNING WATER

BEFORE the ice had moved out of the river they had their plans well under way. Behind their camp was a level bench that was well timbered with spruce-trees, and here they erected a frame on which they could whipsaw spruce boards. Shorty, on more than one occasion, had been forced to make boats in which to navigate the wilderness rivers. These boats, however, had been nailed together in a haphazard way, and it was not until he had talked to the boys that he realized how easy it was to make a craft that was well designed as well as serviceable. He therefore watched with the greatest interest while George formed the model of a long dory-like boat out of a piece of dry birch. The boat was to be twenty feet long, so he made the model forty inches long—each two inches representing a foot—and

after they had all agreed on her proportions the model was sawed into ten-inch lengths. After measuring the cross-sections and increasing the measurement to feet, they made strong forms which they nailed to a keel at five-foot intervals. This gave them the shape of their boat and they began at once to whipsaw the necessary boards.

It was slow and tedious work. After felling a tree they would cut it into lengths. These logs were rolled up an incline formed by two small trees, to the top of the sawing frame. After they had been marked, one of them would stand on the log and another on the ground beneath the scaffold, and with the aid of their six-foot saw and an immense amount of toil, the log would be converted into boards. Another complication arose when they found that they would not have enough nails. Every box was knocked down, every bag turned inside out, and even the sleds were taken apart in their search, but without much success. At first they were able to bore holes with a small auger and fasten the boards with wooden pegs, but the auger broke under the heavy work and they were driven to the tedious expedient

of burning the holes with a red-hot spike and then pegging them home with spruce dowels.

Despite their many difficulties, the boat progressed rapidly. As is invariably the case in any labour of this kind, there were many times when they felt discouraged and were tempted to construct a rough raft that would serve the purpose of carrying them to the sea. Thanks, however, to their stern frontier education, the boys and Shorty had formed the habit of carrying to a finish anything they commenced, and they stuck doggedly at their work until the boat was completed. Then came the difficulty of making her water-tight, but a mixture of caribou tallow and spruce gum gave them a good pitch, and after the boat's seams had received a liberal coating, they were ready for their long journey.

Nabesna Charlie took a great interest in the construction of the boat. He would spend hours sitting on the river bank watching the white men labour, but, Indian-like, he never offered his services. If he was asked to get an axe, or carry a board, he did so with perfect cheerfulness, but his attitude seemed to be that of a man who was connected in no way with the life about him.

But when the boat was half completed Nabesna Charlie began to bestir himself. He went to work in the most irresponsible way, gathering a few birch poles here and some birch bark there, but four days later he had completed a tiny birch-bark canoe. Nothing could have served as a better illustration of the fundamental differences between the white man and the Indian. The Indian's canoe was in every part a product of the wilderness. Its lightness—George could raise it above his head with one hand—allowed it to dance like a dead leaf on the swiftest water, and where rapids or falls barred its course it could be carried with ease over the roughest mountain-sides. It was as perfect a contrivance as man could produce for carrying a passenger through the wilderness—but there its usefulness ended.

The boat that the boys and Shorty had built, on the other hand, while well modelled and able to ride the rough rapids, was far more than a carrier of passengers. Its strong frame and solid construction made it a thing of power. In its ample body was space for dogs, guns, tools, and articles of great weight—it was an efficient ally—a product of the white man's civilization.

During the boat-building days they talked endlessly of their plans, and whenever they rested the conversation would turn to wild surmises concerning the location of Lucky Simpson's cottonwood-tree, until in their dreams at night they could see its gnarled branches and the gleam of gold coming from the hole in its trunk. They had all at different times gotten good views of the country to the eastward, and its low, yet rugged, character bore out Lucky Simpson's statement that it was a land of many streams and dangerous cañons.

Nabesna Charlie's canoe was completed several days before the big boat, and he at once began to gather together the few belongings that he had brought from the Siwash Mountains. From his preparations it was evident that he intended to leave them, but they were greatly surprised when, on a clear spring morning, they awoke to find that the Indian had gone. As they knew nothing about him, they may be forgiven for fearing that some of their belongings might have found their way into Nabesna Charlie's canoe, but this was not the case. A careful search told them that he had taken a moderate quantity of caribou meat

and a few necessary odds and ends, but nothing else in their camp had been touched.

Shorty was furious. "You kin shoot me dead, if that ain't jest like a Injun!" he cried. "Jest when we git him patched up so he kin travel, 'n jest when we git him 'broke in' to white man's ways, off he goes like a puff o' smoke, an' never even says o-revoy!"

The boys did not take the matter so seriously, for they realized that the Indian undoubtedly had a good reason for leaving, and how, or when he left the camp was a matter of no great importance. Furthermore they liked Nabesna Charlie, and felt sorry for him, and their better judgment made them hesitate before judging him by civilized standards.

Before trusting themselves to the mercies of the unknown river, they made a strong *cache* by laying their sleds across the branches of two spruce-trees and placing on this improvised platform all the things they could dispense with. An old sled cover, firmly lashed over the whole, would protect the *cache* from the weather, and on a piece of tin George scratched the following words:

"This *cache* is the property of Shorty McLain,

Fred Morgan, and George Draper. We may return so do not take anything unless you're up against it."

The following morning they loaded their boat, which they had named *The Zebra* on account of the lines of black pitch that covered her seams, and with a last look at their old camp-ground, they entered the current which rushed onward into the unknown.

At first they were too busy adjusting themselves to their new environment to notice the country about them. The dogs in particular were a great responsibility. Being packed together as they were, in a small space, gave them endless chances for quarrelling, and Fred, who pulled the bow oar, was hard put to it to keep order. While they had loaded the boat to the best of their ability, they found that she did not trim well and this necessitated a slight shifting of their cargo, but as soon as this was accomplished they dipped their home-made oars and swept southward on the wild waters of the unnamed river.

"Watch for axe marks or old camps on the bank," George called, as they began to feel the full force of the current.

"Right you are, Son!" Shorty answered. "If anybody's been crazy enough to come into this country, we want to find out about him."

"Well, Lucky Simpson made a camp near the dead cottonwood," Fred suggested.

"That's just the idea," George cried. "If we can find one of Simpson's camps, we'll be a long way towards the discovery of the gold he found."

Talking and planning, they swept down the rapid river. While it reminded the boys of the days they had spent on the Kachiltna, the previous summer, it was far more exciting than that experience had been, for there they had been familiar with every inch of the river, while now they knew nothing of the dangers ahead of them, nor even the part of the country towards which the swift current was bearing them.

The greatest danger in "running" a wilderness river is the possibility of being swept unawares into a dangerous rapid, or over a waterfall. Luckily an experienced man can tell, by the character of the surrounding country, when these dangers are liable to be encountered, and as all three were well versed in the art of river navigation they swept along in perfect security where inexperienced

men would have been in fear for their lives. Now and then they would come to places where the river plunged between rocky walls, but by hugging the banks and turning the boat's bow upstream, they were able to drop down slowly, choosing the safe course as they advanced.

The change from the sledding of the past winter was a delight to them. Ice blocks along the beaches and drifts of snow in the shadow of the cliffs, showed them that summer had not yet come, but the sky was blue and the smell of the budding cottonwood-trees came to their nostrils on the cool air from the river banks, and they were supremely happy.

In the late afternoon they came to a quiet part of the river. As they were drifting slowly along between the densely wooded banks, George's quick eye caught a glimpse of a fresh-cut tree stump. "Axe marks," he cried, as he swung the boat's head towards shore, but an instant later they saw that the stumps came to a point, and Shorty and Fred had a good laugh at his expense.

"Say, Fred, he don't know beaver cuttin's from axe marks," Shorty chuckled. "Pretty soon he'll be tellin' us that a woodpecker's hole is a letter-box."

George stood the chaffing composedly and, on sighting a smooth stretch of beach below, he brought the boat into the bank and they made camp.

From the beginning of their first day on the river, the three fortune-hunters became imbued with the excitement of their new quest. Although their life in the Siwash Mountains had not been lacking in interest or excitement, it had lacked a powerful objective. This stimulation was furnished by the search for Lucky Simpson's lost mine, and the excitement and danger of navigating the unknown river. They, therefore, went about their camp-making with the greatest enthusiasm. After felling a dead spruce for firewood, and seeing that the dogs were securely tied, George left the pitching of the tent and the cooking to Fred and Shorty, and disappeared in the forest. His plan was to get as good a view as he could of the country ahead of them in order that they might have some knowledge on which to lay their plans.

With his gun on his shoulder, he climbed steadily upward. On the river bottom near camp, he found a dense growth of cottonwood but on the

steep hillsides it gave place to gnarled spruce-trees whose firm roots offered good hand-holds during the hard climb. Three hundred feet above the river he came to the first bench, where to his delight he found a distinctly marked moose trail that wound among the scattered birches. The upper wall of the bench was formed by a line of rugged cliffs, and at once George realized that from the top of the cliffs he would be able to get a magnificent view of the valley of the unknown river.

Choosing a snow-filled gully as a roadway, he began his climb. After leaving the bench he came to a mass of gigantic boulders that had fallen from the grim cliffs above. The rocks grew smaller as he advanced until he came out on a fairly even slope of scree. One hundred feet above the rocks gave place to a great field of snow that, protected by the overhanging cliffs, had not yet felt the influence of the sun. The snow was firmly packed and over its smooth surface George made rapid progress.

An hour later he crawled out of the narrow head of the gully, and as he forced his way through a thicket of storm-stunted evergreens that clung to

the top of the cliff, he gasped with awe. Far down below him, already shrouded in the blue shadows of the coming night, lay the unknown river. From where he stood he felt as if he could throw a stone into the rushing waters that ran like a great silver ribbon into a rugged mass of hills some ten miles to the south. Directly across, rose the rugged foothills of a line of rock-ribbed mountains that formed a span of the mighty range that they had crossed with their dog-teams. From these mountains came a river that emptied through what he could see was a series of deep cañons, into the unknown river. The fork lay about five miles below their camp, and several miles beyond that there were indications of another stream that entered from the east.

Most of the grim land was wrapped in the blue shadows of the encircling mountains, but high above the naked summits of rock and ice were still flashing in the rays of the setting sun. Over all the mighty jumble of mountain and forest brooded a solemn silence—not even an echo of the white rapids below their camp reached him, and an irrepressible feeling of loneliness crept over him.

"Whew!" he said, half aloud. "This is the

wildest bit of country I've seen in many a day," and later, as his eyes followed the winding river eastward, he added, "There are the cañons Simpson spoke of—I hope the old Zebra will take us through all right."

After he had thoroughly familiarized himself with that portion of the river that came within his vision, he noticed that night was falling rapidly, and in the hope of reaching camp before total darkness had overtaken him he began to climb rapidly downward over the cliffs.

In descending, he chose a new route which led through a larger break in the cliffs some fifty yards beyond.

Had he climbed up that way he would have risked the sport of a slide down the steep snow slope, but he was mountaineer enough to realize the danger of sliding down an unknown slope. What appeared to be the slower but safest course was to climb downward on the rocks that lined the gully and, swinging his rifle on his shoulder, he at once began the rough descent.

All went well for the first three hundred feet, but, as he neared the base of the cliffs, he saw that the snow had sagged outward from the base of

the rocks and had formed a deep fissure that would be difficult to cross. This caused him to work away from the sides of the gully, and he soon found himself among some great boulders that were surrounded by deep drifts of snow. The snow, while steep, led down evenly to the scree slopes below the cliffs, and with the idea of attempting the slide, he crept around the lower face of one of the great boulders.

He never knew just what happened afterward, for the series of startling events that followed left him dazed. The first thing, as he remembered it, was that he felt himself falling. He knew, furthermore, that there was a large opening beneath him for the snow about him was falling too, and offered no support. An instant later he was in darkness and a choking mass of snow swept over him. It was at this point that a desperate danger signal reached his brain, for the snow about him was convulsed by a heavy body, and he heard a growl that was so deep and menacing that his heart nearly stood still. In his fall the sling of his rifle had slipped from his shoulder, and he found himself pulling desperately at the breach-block while flying snow filled his eyes and hampered

his actions. Then came a blinding, stunning blow on his head that robbed him of his senses.

It could not have been long before George regained consciousness, and when his badly muddled brain began to clear, he found that he was alone in a cave that was formed by the overhang of a large boulder, and by the snow that had drifted over it. Despite the hole that had been made by his body, the air was heavy with the unmistakable smell of a carnivorous animal's lair. As this fact sank home, George clutched his rifle which was lying across his legs, but the next instant he realized that he was alone.

It took him a long time to collect his thoughts for a large swelling that appeared on the back of his head told him that he had been crushed against the rock. After rubbing some snow on his temples he felt better, and before many minutes had passed he was able to climb out of the cold cave and look about him. Darkness had about fallen when he reached the open air, but enough light remained to allow him to see a deep trail that ran from his feet to the scree-slopes below. A glance told him that it was the trail of a grizzly bear, and while he pondered on the good fortune

that had allowed him to come unscathed out of such a serious adventure, he moved slowly downward into the timber.

On reaching the edge of the timbered ledge he could see the cheerful glimmer of a camp-fire through the trees, and by the joyous shouts that answered his he knew that Fred and Shorty had been worried about him. When he first entered the radius of the firelight they did not realize that anything unusual had happened. But Fred's quick eye soon noticed his scratched face and the blood that was flowing from the bruise on his head, and in an instant he had made him comfortable beside the fire.

When George had told his story they were speechless with amazement, and at last Shorty gasped: "Hanged if he didn't fall into a grizzlies' hibernatin' den! Did yer ever hear the beat o' that?"

"I've been afraid of doing the same thing myself when I was travelling alone among the cliffs," Fred ejaculated, "but I never expected to meet a man who'd really done it."

"Scared of it!" Shorty grunted. "I should say you would be scared! Why, I've wondered a

thousand times why—with all the bears that there are in this country—fellers travellin' in the winter time didn't stumble onto them oftener, and up to this I've only heard o' one case—an Injun over Iliamny Lake way."

"Did he get hurt any?" George asked.

"Sure he did," Shorty answered soberly. "His face was half knocked off—he was a disquietin' lookin' object when I seen him."

Luckily, George's injuries were insignificant, and after a wash in cold water and a good supper, he felt none the worse for his strange adventure. Over the fire they talked the matter over and they had no difficulty in arriving at the correct conclusion. The bear, with that remarkable instinct possessed by the species, had chosen his hibernating den under the overhanging boulder with the knowledge that he would be completely covered by the winter snows. On account of the shade from the steep cliffs the snow had remained much longer than it had in more exposed places, and the bear undoubtedly had begun to awaken from his long winter sleep. The heat from his body, too, had melted the snow that covered him so that it was too thin to bear George's weight. Shorty

was particularly certain that nothing but good fortune had saved George from serious injury, for had not the bear been drowsy from his long sleep and confused by his unceremonious awakening, he would have used his teeth and claws with deadly effect.

CHAPTER XVI

THE LAST CHANCE

THEIR first day on the river began a period, that for sheer work and disappointment, exceeded anything that the boys had ever experienced. Ten miles below their old *cache* they came to a network of swift tributaries, and for a month they ran rapids, tracked their boat through swift water, clambered over cliffs, staggered under heavy packs, and hacked endless miles of trails through tangled alder thickets. Their bodies were scratched and bruised, and their clothes were torn to rags, until they looked like animated scarecrows.

To add to their troubles the land seemed to consist entirely of cañons and dead cottonwoods, so that Lucky Simpson's description of the place where the gold lay hidden became a cruel joke instead of a help. If they examined one cotton-

wood with a hollow trunk, they examined five hundred, and in time they reached a state of mind where they almost hated the sight of them.

"If I ever ketch Lucky Simpson alone, I'll put him inside o' some dead cottonwood, and keep him there until he's as sick of 'em as I be," Shorty would say as he searched half-heartedly in some hollow stump, and the boys would grin delightedly at the mere contemplation of such a revenge.

By the end of May they had thoroughly explored three streams that came from the west, and two that entered the main river from the east, and worn down to bone and sinew by their exertions, they at last pitched their camp on the bank of the big river. Their travels had taken them through a land of rock and burned timber, and, with the exception of an occasional half-starved grizzly, they had seen practically no game. Their food supply was shrinking rapidly, and although they hated the idea of giving up, they realized that the time to start for the sea-coast was near at hand.

Leaving Fred and Shorty to overhaul their outfit for the dash through the rapids, George climbed a high mountain that rose behind their

camp. From its summit he saw that the cañon travel was nearly at an end. The hills disappeared about ten miles ahead, and the river entered a broad valley that ran westward towards the sea. He knew without being told that it was the Tokanuska River valley, as that was the name of the first big river to enter the sea south of the Kachiltna.

"Only ten miles between us and failure," he said sadly, as his eyes swept the blue lowlands, for he knew that when they left the last cañon behind, their last chance of finding Lucky Simpson's treasure would be gone.

Taking out his binoculars he began a minute examination of the nearer hills, and before long his search was rewarded by the discovery of a large stream that entered the main river about four miles below. The course of the stream was hidden by intervening ranges, but he could see that it came from a deep break in the western mountains.

"That's our last chance—our last chance," he repeated slowly, and after a long look, to fix every detail in his mind, he began the downward climb to camp. The next morning they made an early start. George's discovery, that a large

stream entered the unknown river a few miles below, was of great importance, for it might be on that very stream that Simpson had found his gold-encrusted rock.

"There's no way out of it. We've got to take a look at that river," George said, as he took his place at the steering-sweep.

Fred and Shorty were of the same mind and, as the boat swept downward through the swift current, they laid out a plan of campaign. Five miles is quickly covered when the full force of a snow-fed river is hurling the boat along, and almost before they realized it the rock wall on the western side of the river began to draw back, and Fred shouted, "There she is! . . . right in the middle of that line of spruce!"

In the place toward which he pointed the gleam of an entering stream showed clearly against the dark wall of evergreens, and bringing the boat around in a graceful curve George beached her on a smooth, gravel point above the new tributary. They went to work without wasting any time in idle conjecture. The tent was pitched, the dogs firmly staked out on a strip of dry sand, and everything movable was taken out of their boat.

After they had set aside enough provisions to last them on their exploration of the new river, the rest was placed on a *cache* and covered with a stout canvas. Despite the fact that they had lived with the strictest economy, the food outlook was becoming grave. George, who had been taking a careful count of their supplies, hit the nail on the head when he said: "If it wasn't for the fact that we can get to the coast in our boat we'd be in a bad way."

"It's because we're short of vegetable food," Fred grunted, as he sat filing a sharp edge on one of their battered axes. "If I could get into a potato field when there was no one looking, I'd do a lot of damage!"

"If you're goin' to wish, why not go the limit and add on a strawberry patch and a corn crib, an' a couple o' apple orchards," Shorty said, with a broad grin wrinkling his brown face.

But while they laughed and joked about their future, the fact remained that they were at last coming to grips with the wilderness. Although every ounce of fat had disappeared from their bodies, and they moved with the freedom and suppleness of wild animals, their strength was

beginning to decline. For a long time their principal diet had been meat, and although they scarcely realized it, they were, as the coaches say, "trained too fine."

After a hasty lunch, and a look to see that the dogs were safely tied, they picked up their rifles and entered the spruces that followed the banks of what they called the "New River." A half-mile up-stream there was a low mountain from whose rocky crest they could get a good view of the upper reaches of the valley, and they felt that they would be able to plan better after having studied the country. Now, a reconnaissance always has a spice of adventure about it, particularly when there is a prospect of securing food, and, as they were unencumbered except for their guns, they tramped gaily along. Close to the stream the land was flat and heavily timbered, but as they reached the foot of the mountain the woods were less dense and they could see about them. Despite their holiday mood, they realized the serious side of their trip and they studied the things about them with the skilled eyes of frontiersmen.

There is, perhaps, no gift possessed by men of

the great outdoors that is more mystifying to the city dweller than their ability to read the book of nature. An inexperienced man could have taken the same walk many times without seeing anything of particular interest, but the boys and Shorty made many important discoveries. They found, among other things, that no white men had ascended the valley during the summer-time; that they might expect to find moose farther up the river; that there had been a plague among the rabbits two winters before—that there were glaciers at the head of the river—that no Indians had hunted there, and that they would encounter no big falls in their future journey to the sea-coast.

An hour's hard climb took them to the mountain top and then they saw, spread below them, a vast extent of untrammelled wilderness. To begin with, they saw that the New River would not be difficult to ascend for the valley broadened out into a broad plain that ended only ten miles away at the foot of the mountains. A deep cañon at the head of the valley showed them where the stream entered. To the surprise of the boys, the valley was stripped bare of vegetation, and

through the great stretches of gravel the river wound in many channels. Shorty gave them the reason in a few words.

"That's the work of glaciers," he said. "I've seen a couple of valleys just like it. I reckon the sun melts the snow back in the mountains so fast that it floods over the valley. What I don't like is that we kin never work placer gold in a place like that . . . what with boulders and quicksands and floods a feller'd go dotty tryin' to make a livin'."

"How about Simpson's quartz then?" Fred asked.

"Well!" Shorty answered dubiously, "we know he found the rock in a cañon and there ain't any cañons on this creek until you fetch the base o' the mountains."

For some minutes they sat in silence while they studied intently the prospects spread below them.

"It looks like a good country for quartz," George said at last.

"And meat, too," Fred added. "There's a lot of sheep grass on those mountain-sides above the cañon, and while two of us are prospecting, the other can hunt."

"That sounds good to me, I'm getting tired of mouldy moose meat," George said, laughing, and after a last look to impress the lay of the land on their minds they turned and began their descent of the mountain.

Thanks to the lengthening days, they still had several hours of daylight before them, and after a serious struggle in a narrow gorge, they found good water and succeeded in making camp on the edge of the gravel plain.

Shortly before reaching their camp-site a thing happened that, though unavoidable, threw a gloom over their usual cheerfulness. On account of the impossibility of foretelling the length of their stay, they had been forced to take the dogs with them. The weight of the dogs, and the food that was necessary to feed them, added greatly to the difficulty of tracking the boat upward through the swift water. By using all their strength, however, they advanced successfully until they reached the gorge. One glance at the swift water that rushed between the steep walls convinced them that it would be impossible to pull the boat through unless they unloaded the dogs, but putting the dogs ashore offered a serious

problem, for if they were left alone without being tied, a fight was sure to result. After talking the matter over it was decided that Fred should take the dogs over the cliffs to the head of the cañon and tie them where they would be safe until they could reach them with the boat.

Arming himself with a stout club with which to keep order, he began the hard climb. At first the dogs were delighted at their unexpected freedom, and behaved well, but as Fred advanced the climbing became more and more difficult, and at last he reached a ledge that overhung one of the steepest portions of the cañon and formed a very serious obstruction. He saw instantly that he would have to help the dogs over the ledge, and that quickly, for they were crowding together on the steep rocks and were beginning to whine with excitement. Working as rapidly as possible, for he realized that the dogs might begin to fight at any moment, he pulled himself upward to a point where he could reach down and help the dogs over the awkward ledge.

Whether it was the fear that he was going to leave them, or just natural viciousness, he could not

determine, but while he was lifting Baldy to the top of the ledge, the fight started. In an instant every dog was engaged in the savage struggle and the clamour of the battle rose above the roar of the water and swept down the cañon to the ears of George and Shorty, who were helpless to aid. Reaching down with his club Fred did his best to enforce order, but the dogs were thoroughly roused with the lust to kill and he realized that he must take a desperate chance or the death-toll would be heavy.

From a crack in the rocks, where the battle was the fiercest, grew a stout, young balsam, and without a second's hesitation Fred jumped for this insecure foothold. As he leaped he saw two dogs that were in a death grip, roll over the edge of the cliff, but he was too busy to even give them a thought, and yelling commands with all his strength, he showered blows on the struggling huskies. Twice the surging mass closed about him and the gnashing teeth of some dog who was down, and fighting for his life, gashed his legs and ankles. Luckily for him, the animal was snapping out blindly, for the Northern husky has gleaming, wolf-like fangs, and if they had closed

on his legs firmly he would have carried the scars to his dying day.

At last, more from exhaustion than from anything Fred could do, the struggle abated, and with the help of his club and voice, he finally separated the remaining dogs. Then panting from his exertions and overcome with sorrow at the loss of so many animals that had served them with such magnificent faithfulness through the hard winter, he helped the wounded survivors over the ill-fated ledge and tied them on a smooth beach at the head of the cañon.

On his return he stopped at the scene of the battle. The bodies of three dogs were stretched out on the red rocks. Three, in all, had fallen from the cliffs and, bruised and stunned by their contact with the boulders, had been swept to their death in the icy waters.

Their camp that night was a sad one, and long after the glacier winds had swept down from the mountains, they sat about their driftwood fire and talked of their loss. Fred, in particular, felt the occurrence keenly for he realized that George and Shorty might think that the fight was the result of carelessness on his part, but they

soon relieved him of any feeling of responsibility.

"I've handled malamoots for over fourteen years, and I couldn't have done more than you did," Shorty explained, and George added: "If there is any blame it rests on all of us, for we should have made a separate trip with the dogs, and then they would not have had a chance to get started."

The six dogs that remained were a bedraggled looking lot the next morning, but as Shorty insisted that exercise would do them good they were hitched to the tracking-line and forced once more to work for their living. The boys found that Shorty had spoken with full knowledge of the Northern dog, for the smooth, gravel banks gave them a good opportunity to pull, and when they once more felt the weight of the tug-line and heard the ring of the familiar commands, they forgot their wounds and threw themselves into the work with the greatest eagerness. With the help of the dogs they crossed the valley and encamped, on the following evening, at the foot of the cañon that they hoped might prove to be the scene of Simpson's discovery.

The days that followed were filled equally with

interest and hardship. By sacrificing their canvas blanket-covers, they made pack-saddles for the dogs, and after seeing that their boat was secure against the floods, that appearances indicated were liable to occur, they began their exploration. Instead of following the river, which was no longer navigable, they climbed to the top of the cañon walls and plodded steadily into the mountains. While their principal hope was the discovery of gold, they soon began to feel the pinch of want and they searched for game with as much eagerness as they did for the precious metal. The rugged mountain-sides were unsuited for sheep, but they soon found that grizzly bears were numerous. They often saw the huge beasts wandering morosely among the mountains and twice they encountered bears who seemed inclined to dispute their advance. The presence of the bears was accounted for by the great number of ground squirrels. The mountain-sides were full of their holes and their shrill calls of *chicki-chicki-chicki*, came from every side. Once, on arriving at the crest of a hill, they saw a grizzly with two cubs, busily engaged in digging out a squirrel. As they were undiscovered they lay down in the mountain

heather and watched the strange scene. The old bear would dig viciously for a few minutes, the earth spurting in a steady stream from under her powerful paws. Then, as the hill was filled with squirrel holes and many of them joined, she would stand on her hind legs and look anxiously about as if she feared that the squirrel would escape through an unguarded hole. The cubs were little balls of fur, and still too young to understand what their mother was doing, and while she was working to get them food, they engaged in a wrestling match that made the boys and Shorty chuckle with suppressed amusement.

For more than a week they panted across the rugged hills. The mountains up to this point were bare of mineral bearing rock, although Shorty, who had had more experience than the boys in this kind of prospecting, examined the country they traversed with the greatest care. Not satisfied with testing the promising bits of quartz that they found, they went so far as to crush and wash any kind of rock with which they were unfamiliar, but invariably their efforts were unsuccessful.

Another thing that worried them was their shortage of food. The dogs, by following the

example set by the grizzlies, caught enough ground squirrels to feed themselves, but although the boys and Shorty also ate many a squirrel-stew, they realized that they could not depend on this diet for many days. Luckily, when they were about to begin their retreat, a change in the formation of the country brought a change in their fortunes.

The long days of travel since they had left their boat, had carried them to the edge of timber-line. The cañon at this time made a great bend to the west, and the rugged formation of the foothills gave place to great, smooth mountain slopes. As the new scene burst into sight they sat down among the rocks and, leaning back on their packs, let their eyes travel over the vast expanse. Suddenly a puzzled look crossed George's face and, pointing towards the base of a huge talus slide a mile or more away, he said: "What are those white spots yonder where the rocks meet the grass?"

His remark caused them to bring out their field-glasses, and a moment later they were wild with excitement over the sight that the powerful lenses disclosed. On every mountain-side they could see bands of white sheep. Lower down

among the rolling fields of grass were great bands of ewes and lambs, and lines of white dots that moved across the talus slopes told them that other bands were coming down to get their morning's food. Higher up, among the rocky peaks, they saw smaller clusters that they knew were bands of wise old rams, with curling horns. It was a mountain sheep metropolis—a hunter's paradise.

For some time after their discovery they could hardly speak so great was their surprise, but at last Shorty's spirits overflowed.

"Ding dong my hide! Did you ever see the beat of it!" he cried excitedly.

The boys laughed until they gasped for breath while the great dogs, who could not see the sheep, looked eagerly at their masters' faces.

At last the boys quieted down, and they talked the matter over.

"There must be three hundred sheep in sight, and we've simply got to get one before lunch-time, but we want to go slow," Shorty said earnestly.

"It's about a mile along the top of the cañon to the nearest band, so let's hike along until we get close enough to see how the land lies," George suggested.

As the idea was a good one they rose and began a steady advance among the broken boulders that rimmed the gorge. As there was a high mountain wall above them, and the wind was in their faces, they were in no fear of being observed, but when they had reached a point where it was necessary to use caution, they each took charge of two dogs, and moved with the greatest care. The dogs, however, soon caught the scent of game and by their eager whines and attempts to break loose, necessitated a second halt.

As Fred had never shot a mountain sheep George volunteered to remain behind and hold the dogs, and Shorty and Fred instantly removed their packs and other encumbrances and prepared for the hunt. Fred placed his pack against a boulder that overlooked the walls of the gorge and, as his eyes rested for an instant on the hillside below, his mouth opened with surprise and he sank slowly to his knees.

"There's a band of sheep below us, fellows!" he said, in a hoarse whisper. "What'll we do about it?"

For an instant George and Shorty regarded him incredulously, but when they had crawled to his

side they saw a band of six rams lying contentedly on the steep mountain-side, some six hundred feet below them.

For a few minutes they lay flat on the moss studying the problem. At last George lowered his head and said, "There's not one chance in a hundred of getting closer, and yet if we shoot one from here he'll roll down to the bottom of the cañon."

"Wait a second!" Shorty answered. "My brain works slow, but I'm beginning to remember a trick the White River Indians taught me."

He hesitated a moment, with puckered brow, but after he had given the entire hillside a searching scrutiny, he nodded his head and disclosed his plans.

"Now boys," he began earnestly, "I'm agoin' to bring those sheep right up to this ledge. It'll be up to you, George, to keep the dogs quiet, but you've got to do it. In fact, you'd better back track with 'em a ways and then they can't ball us up."

Then turning to Fred, he pointed to a small water-worn gully that extended down the mountain-side some fifty yards on their right.

"Unless I miss my guess the sheep will come up that draw, so crawl over as close to it as you want to and hide in a safe place back of a rock."

While Fred was taking his position, George took charge of the dogs and as they were leashed together in pairs he had no difficulty in leading them over the back trail until he found a small gully that would prevent them from seeing what was happening. After securing them to a large boulder, he crawled stealthily to the edge of the ledge and ensconced himself behind a rock from which he could see the exciting events that were to follow.

By this time Fred had hidden himself in a favourable place and George watched Shorty who was watching the rams intently. At last he raised his rifle and laying it on the boulder behind which he was hiding, he took a long and steady aim. For a moment George thought that he was going to fire at the sheep, but as the roar of the shot woke the echoes, he saw the bullet throw up a cloud of dust on the right of the band. At the report of the rifle all the sheep jumped to their feet, but instead of running, they seemed only moderately surprised at what had happened, and

as the echoes rumbled back and forth among the mountains they stood as still as statues. For a minute it looked as if the band had completely recovered from its fright. A young ram even went so far as to take a few unconcerned nibbles at some sheep-grass. The oldest ram in the band was not at ease, however, for he had seen the spurt of gravel that the bullet had thrown in the air and while he did not know what had caused the phenomenon, he felt that he would be safer among his beloved crags far above. Before leaving the place, however, the old ram seemed to be thinking the matter over. He looked down the left side of the gorge but that road would lead him towards timber-line; he then examined the upper side of the gorge but that route would take him across the bare hillside where he had seen the disquieting cloud of dust. This fact evidently shaped his thoughts for, without further hesitation, he turned and began to climb upward towards the ledge on which Fred and Shorty were waiting. One by one the other rams followed their leader, until the youngest, who was evidently reluctant to leave the pleasant spot, tossed his head and joined the tail of the procession. As the old ram

climbed upward, he noticed the draw to his left, and the instinct that had been handed down to him, through generations of sheep, led him into its protecting walls.

At this point, George, who was watching the wilderness drama with shining eyes, could hardly contain himself, for he saw that Shorty's prophecy had come true and that the sheep were climbing directly towards Fred. At times the rams were hidden from his view, but occasional glimpses of the tops of their curling horns told him that they would soon reach Fred's hiding-place. A moment later the entire band had gathered on the very ledge where Fred was hidden, and as the report of his rifle broke the silence, the largest ram sank quietly to earth and the rest dashed upward towards the overhanging snow-fields.

Three hours later they were camped in as wild a spot as any of them had ever seen. An avalanche, or some other convulsion of nature, in years gone by, had formed a deep hollow in the cañon wall. In this sheltered spot the seeds of balsam trees, brought by birds or scattered by mountain winds, had taken root, until a little grove had been formed far above the nearest timber. In this

little pocket in the mountain-side, the three had found shelter, and as they lay beside the fire, eagerly sniffing the appetizing odour of roasting sheep-meat, they could see the white waters of the glacial river three thousand feet below, and could look down on the backs of two golden eagles who were soaring majestically through the rays of the setting sun.

CHAPTER XVII

FAILURE

THERE is nothing in this world so hard to bear as failure, but failure has its uses, for it is in fighting it that men develop their strongest virtues. The two boys and Shorty were facing failure, but instead of bowing to it, every fighting quality in their natures was aroused. During their talk over the camp-fire they had faced the issue frankly. They knew in a general way that the streams that drained the mountains they were exploring eventually joined the Tokanuska River, which, after traversing some two hundred miles of semi-known wilderness, emptied into the Gulf of Alaska. They did not worry about the Tokanuska, for they had heard that, with the exception of one bad cañon, it was easily navigated, but between them and the main river was some fifty miles of unknown water. They were partly reas-

sured by the fact that the stream they had ascended was a salmon-river, as the bear trails that followed its banks testified, but, although this meant that there were no large falls below them, they realized that salmon could ascend water that would smash a boat into kindling-wood. Such dangers were to be expected, however, and they accepted them as part of the day's work, but outside of the sheep-meat their entire supply of food would last them but a few days. Shorty epitomized their predicament over the breakfast fire in these words: "We're hungry now, and we'll be eatin' our shoe-pacs before we git to salt water, so we'd better beat it *pronto*."

"You're right, Shorty," George answered. "If we had any more meat we couldn't carry it, and this sheep may last us until we hit the Tokanuska."

Fred having agreed with their plans, they broke camp, and an hour later they had climbed out of the cañon and the wilderness in all its majestic vastness lay spread below them. They rested on a mossy bank, and let their eyes roam over the grim expanse. Despite their toil-worn bodies they were all conscious of a feeling of sadness at

the thought of leaving it, for it was the kind of country that frontiersmen love. A mile away across the cañon they could see a grizzly digging morosely on the steep mountain-side; high above, on the edge of the everlasting snow-fields, were bands of white sheep straggling down to their feeding-grounds, while from every side came the chirping of ground-squirrels, the whistling of marmots, and the cackle of ptarmigans.

"Gee! What a range to *summer* in!" Fred murmured longingly, as they drank it all in.

"You're right," Shorty said, sympathetically. "I'd give my left ear for enough grub to last us three months, and if we had it, I'd bet my right hand that we'd find gold." While they talked, George had been busy with the grandeur of the scene. His imagination had always been strongly affected by the sight of high mountains, and he was making the most of his last view of the range that they had striven so long to reach. The great glacier that swept downward to the head of the cañon interested him particularly and, as he followed its winding course through the towering ranges, his eyes fell on a lake of sapphire blue that ran far back into the mountains from the opposite

side of the ice. With the aid of his binoculars he was able to see it clearly, and he was surprised to find that the reservoir was caused by the glacier, which, forming a huge dam, had imprisoned the waters within the deep valley. Noticing his interest, Fred and Shorty brought out their glasses and studied the lake.

"I'd like to paddle around it in a canoe!" Fred exclaimed wistfully, as he squinted through the lenses. "It looks like a good place for trout."

"A trout'd ketch his death o' cold in that pond," Shorty answered, laughing. "That dam at the foot of the lake is mountain ice, one hundred per cent. pure, and as cold as they make it. I've heard tell that they bust loose now and ag'in, and the water rips the insides out o' all creation, but that's in the summer-time when the ice is movin' fast."

The boys laughed sceptically as they readjusted their packs, and then, with the slow, rolling gait that comes from long experience under heavy weights, they moved eastward out of the mountains. On the crest of the last rise they halted for one more look at the mountains.

"It's our last smell of the snow," Shorty said,

waving his hand towards the white peaks. "From now on it's salt water or bust!"

Turning slowly he led the way towards the lowlands, but as George fell in line to follow him, he stopped, and cast a mystified glance towards the glacier. Sweeping down the farther side of the ice-river was what appeared to be a great column of ice that gleamed in the sun, and from the surrounding mountains came an ominous rumbling that swelled slowly into a steady roar, like the sound of distant thunder.

"Wait! Look!" he cried, beside himself with excitement. "The glacier's busted loose!"

During the hour that followed three silent men stood helpless while the gigantic forces of nature changed the face of the earth. They saw a million tons of ice swept aside like a wisp of straw; they saw cliffs that had weathered a thousand storms ripped from their beds; they heard the cañons roaring with the voice of ceaseless thunder peals, and they watched the great plain at the base of the range turn into an angry sea that severed them from civilization. During the whole of the terrifying spectacle they said hardly a word. It was all they could do to adjust their minds to

the tremendous complications that were facing them. When they *did* speak, however, their words reflected the unconquerable spirit of the frontiersman.

"Our boat's gone but we're alive and kicking —we'll get out somehow,"—George said, when the deep roaring of angry water had begun to cease.

Shorty gave George a hearty slap on the shoulder. "That's the stuff!" he cried. "What do we care for boats! Cheechawkers that's afraid to git their feet wet may need 'em, but we're sour-doughs, and we'll run the Tokanuska on a raft."

"It's a case of *must*," Fred agreed. "But there won't be any more crazy lakes to bother us, for that one has gone as dry as a bone."

For a while they looked at the miles of glistening rock that an hour before had been the bottom of the lake, and then they moved rapidly towards the lowlands. Despite the dangers that threatened them they appreciated their good fortune, for had they been at the foot of the mountains they would have been caught like rats in a trap. But little did they realize that the peaceful waters that had beckoned them, were carrying death and

destruction to the sea: Indian villages were swept away; mining camps were obliterated, unnumbered miles of lowland were flooded; the wild things died by thousands, and years afterward men grew serious when they spoke of the Tokanuska Flood.

Three days later they were encamped by a spruce grove whose roots were washed by the yellow waters. They had descended over the foothills in far less time than they had spent in climbing them, and as they rested from their labours they broiled sheep-meat over the coals, and made their plans.

Fred, who was sipping a cup of sugarless tea, suddenly straightened. "I hadn't thought of it, fellows, but what will we lash our raft with, the only rope we have is the small stuff our packs are tied with."

"Leave it to me!" Shorty answered with a broad grin. "An old-timer by the name o' Talkeetna Charlie showed me how to build a bang-up raft, and the best part of it is that there ain't a nail or rope in the whole shebang. I'll show you how she goes when we git outside o' some sheep-meat."

During the afternoon the boys worked like beavers. "Cut me eight dry spruce logs fifteen foot long," Shorty had ordered, and they went at the task with a will. When a tree fell they would lop off the branches, cut it to the required length, and roll it to the water's edge where Shorty would trim it into shape. Then came the construction of the raft, which the boys watched eagerly.

Taking a sharp hatchet, which he always carried in a holster on his belt, Shorty cut a triangular notch near the end of each log. The notches were broader at the bottom than at the top, so that when the logs were laid side by side, and he had driven carefully trimmed, triangular pieces of wood through the notches, the raft was held firmly together at both ends. This part of the work was done in the water, as the floating logs could be moved more easily. As an added precaution they cut two strong poles and placed them across the raft directly under the triangular braces. The ends of these poles and the braces protruded a few inches on either side, and these ends were securely lashed with short pieces of rope which they cut from their pack-lashings. The result was the best and strongest raft that

the boys had ever seen, and Shorty, although he tried to hide it, was hugely pleased at their delight.

When darkness had fallen they sat about a cheerful fire and chopped out two long sweeps, and then relaxing from their continuous labours, they gave themselves up to the enjoyment of a good talk. Thanks to his experiences in water travel George had the foresight to drive a stake in the water, and at intervals he would take a brand from the fire and examine his gauge.

"The lake is going down fast," he said at last. "She's dropped about two inches in the last hour, and if we don't look out we'll be high and dry."

"Two inches an hour makes a foot in six hours," Fred added, seriously.

"It sure does!" Shorty joined in. "But the worst of it is that the water'll drop faster as the lake grows smaller, so we've got to sleep with one eye open."

They slept fitfully and, during the dark hour that precedes the dawn, George, who had gone to inspect his gauge, found that the water was falling fast. Without wasting a moment he rebuilt the smouldering fire and routed out his compan-

ions, and an hour later the shivering dogs and their few belongings were placed on the raft and they were ready for the dangerous journey. A deep roar that came from the mountains on the right gave them the location of the upper cañon. Steering by this noise they would be able to make a fairly straight course towards the outlet, but they realized that the lower cañon might be unnavigable until the water dropped farther, and so they decided to pole the raft across the lake and reconnoitre on foot.

"It will be light in an hour," George said, as he felt the hands of his watch. "And unless there's a mighty strong current running towards the outlet we won't get swept into the gorge."

"Thanks for them words!" Shorty exclaimed fervently, and despite the uncertainty of the future the boys had to laugh.

"Well, here's for wet feet!" George said a minute later, as, pole in hand, he splashed his way towards the raft. Shorty stopped before clambering onto the buoyant logs, and said: "I name this here battleship the *Sourdough*," and with this brief ceremony the staunch raft began its long journey to the sea.

CHAPTER XVIII

"WESTWARD HO!"

WHEN the sun rose, the raft with its load of men and dogs was close to the lower cañon. The roar from the upper gorge had been lost in the distance and, as they walked back and forth, forcing the raft forward with long poles, they anxiously studied the grim walls through which the pent-up water found its outlet. Shorty was steering a course that would take them well to the north of the outlet, for they could see that there was a strong current near shore and they had no desire to be swept between the cañon walls until they had looked the ground over. When they were close enough to the shore to see that there would be no danger in landing, they let the raft drift until they saw a favourable spot only two hundred yards from the gorge.

Fred volunteered to stay on the raft as the

water was falling alarmingly, while George and Shorty waded ashore and began the climb towards the cañon. As they remembered that there was a high wall of rock near the centre of the gorge from which a comprehensive view of the dangerous spot could be secured, they turned inland and, after a half-hour of difficult climbing, they stood on the spray-drenched cliff with the whole fury of the raging flood spread below them.

For some time they studied the wild water in silence. As they knew that it would be only a matter of days before it returned to its usual level, they had agreed to take no foolhardy chances, but their lack of food necessitated their running the cañon at the earliest opportunity. Neither spoke, therefore, until every whirl and eddy of the rapid had come under their experienced eyes, and then Shorty yelled through his cupped hands: "It looks kind o' hectic, but I think we kin make it."

The thunderous roar of the flood nearly drowned his words, and George grinned as he nodded his head in agreement. A moment later he pointed to a mass of dead spruce-trees that were sweeping downward on the high mane of white water that

was formed in the centre of the cañon. As they came opposite, a great log slid from the mane into a savage whirlpool; for an instant it turned under a sheet of foam and they did not see it again until it surged into view, like some gigantic sea-monster, a hundred yards down stream. With serious faces they watched it pass from view, but as their eyes met they grinned again.

"We've got to keep on top of the mane or our goose is cooked," George shouted, and Shorty nodded gravely as he led the way back to the raft.

Fred was eager to hear their report, and he began to yell questions at them almost as soon as they came in sight. They kept the news, however, until they had reached the raft, and then they talked the matter over seriously.

They explained the formation of the cañon to Fred, and told him that their only hope lay in their ability to keep the raft on top of the high mane of water that rushed through the centre of the maelstrom.

"It's a regular sporting proposition," George concluded. "Every day we stay here means a loss of grub, while if we get through all right—and I think we can—we'll be that much to the good."

As they sat silently debating the question in their minds, George's eye fell on Baldy. During the past few days they had been too busy to pay much attention to their faithful follower, and he was regarding them wistfully, with his ears cocked forward as if he wanted to be taken into their confidence.

"How do you feel about it, Baldy? Do you want to run the cañon?" George asked.

To their amusement there was no hesitancy in the old dog's reply. Overcome with delight at being noticed, he tugged at his leash and yelped with excitement, while his masters roared with laughter.

"Baldy's said it!" Fred gasped when he had recovered his breath, and the others agreed with him.

Without further talk they began to make the raft shipshape and an hour later they pushed off and entered the current that swept towards the gorge. Masses of driftwood and the flotsam and jetsam of many square miles of wilderness moved with them. In a mass of brush they saw two rabbits that had died in the flood, and George with an eye to the future lifted them onto the

raft with his pole. "We may be glad to have them for dog food," he explained as he fastened them to a lash rope.

In spite of their apparent calmness, they realized the danger of the coming struggle and feared it, but they had learned by stern experience that loss of self-control would impair their efficiency and increase their risk. Furthermore they had made the decision in cold blood and after mature deliberation and, as they noticed with what speed they were passing the cliffs that flanked the head of the cañon, they realized that they could not turn back now if they wanted to.

An instant later the cañon walls opened out and the deep thunder of the wild water struck their ears. At the very entrance the water seemed to hesitate, and its surface was as smooth as polished metal as it swept downward. They could feel the raft leap like a living thing beneath them, and forcing their poles beneath the lashings they took up the sweeps. A sickening drop came as the raft struck the main current, and then, straight ahead of them between the grim walls, they saw the head of the mane.

"Steady as she is!" George yelled from his

post at the rear sweep as the raft took the white water, but his voice was lost in the thunder of the flood. Then came a confused rush through a smother of foam. They were conscious of sheets of blinding spray; of dark walls that loomed above them and disappeared; of vicious clouds of foam that hid the cowering dogs from view, and then, suddenly, the air cleared, the raft pitched drunkenly over some heavy swells and, as the roar of the cañon grew faint behind them, they found themselves sweeping onward between walls of green spruce.

"Whoopee-e!" Fred yelled triumphantly. He was standing, wet to the skin, at the bow sweep. His hat was gone and his hair was matted about his face.

George looked across the stern sweep at Shorty. He was wiping the spray from his eyes, and the familiar grin was twisting his brown face.

"Jumpin' grizzly bears!" he cried when he turned to George. "Jumpin' grizzly bears, but didn't we travel a few!"

But while the men were wild with enthusiasm over their adventure, the poor dogs could see no fun in it. Bruised, and nearly drowned by the

savage water, they lay on the raft with bedraggled coats. As time passed they recovered some of their former spirit, but in the days that followed they would drop their ears and howl mournfully whenever they heard the sound of swift water ahead.

A mile below the cañon they began to work the raft inshore, for, although they had small hope of finding anything in their camp, they could take no chances. Soon they heard the roar of the mingled waters and, as they swept around a timbered point that was piled high with driftwood, they saw the spot between the two rivers where they had built their *cache*.

For a moment they stood in a tense group in readiness to make the landing, but an instant later they stood erect and let the raft swing wide—their camp had ceased to exist.

"Even the trees that held our *cache* are gone," Fred muttered sadly, as they swept into the main river.

"Hang the trees! It's the fur I'm thinkin' of," Shorty growled. "There was fifteen hundred dollars' worth o' fur in that *cache*, or I'm a Siwash."

"Well, it's tough luck I grant you but we played in luck just the same," George said seriously.

"Sure we did, but when I think of all that fur I git mad all over," Shorty replied, and then a humorous look came into his eyes as he added: "The next time I see one o' them glacier lakes I'm goin' to heave a rock at it—jest to git even."

While they talked they were being swept rapidly southward by the swift waters of the unknown river. The week of warm days that had passed since they had left it had changed it into a raging torrent, for every glacier and snow-field in the vast wilderness that it drained was melting under the spring sun.

"This flood'll help us in some ways. It'll keep us from hittin' a rock," Shorty volunteered as they stood watching the river ahead of them.

"It will help us where rocks are concerned, but we'll get more than our share of 'sweepers.' Look at them hanging over that cut-bank," George said, pointing across the river.

The bank he indicated had been undermined by the water, and the spruce-trees that crowned it had sagged outward, until, in some cases, their branches touched the water that swept beneath.

"I see 'em, fast enough," Shorty growled, "But I don't git no pleasure out o' it. Every time I set eyes on a sweeper I think o' the sourdoughs what's lost their outfits or their lives through hittin' one with a raft.

"There was 'Tenas'[1] Jim Bartman who struck it rich on Indian River. He got on a raft with all his gold dust, and headed for the 'outside,' but he hit a sweeper below Grizzly Flat and no one's ever seen him or the gold since. Then there was Baker's outfit on the White River; the two Swedes at Caribou Crossin'; the Dutchman who drownded on Bear River, and a dozen more that I've forgot."

"We've got to look sharp and keep in the middle of the river," Fred agreed, and as his eyes studied the current, he added: "A man couldn't live three minutes in that water."

"We've changed some, Fred," George laughed. "Do you remember how we used to say that we could swim any old glacier river?"

"Sure I do, and about one hour's tracking on the Kachiltna cured us, we were Cheechawkers alright."

"It's the silt and the cold combined that does

[1] Chinook for little.

it, I guess: the silt pulls you down and the cold takes the strength out of you."

"It must be one, or both," Fred answered, "for that six-footer who went under on Lake Creek last fall was a regular *moose*. He'd won prizes at college for running and swimming, and yet the glacier water was too much for him."

"He was Croswell's pardner," Shorty added. "I met him goin' up the river. He told us as how he'd got prizes for bein' 'a ten-second man,' but he never said what it was he'd done in ten seconds. Croswell said it was eatin' a panful o' biscuits, and I kinder agrees with him, fer the way that feller could git outside o' sour-dough was somethin' amazin'."

The boys had a hard time keeping their faces straight, but when Shorty went forward to test the lashings of the bow-sweep, they had a good laugh.

Although they talked whenever the spirit moved them, they never took their eyes from the river, for they were moving at a dangerous speed and the river was crooked. Under ordinary conditions the stream would have been easy to navigate, but on account of the high water they were practically helpless. All they could do was to

keep the raft in the centre of the river and trust to luck.

As the time passed and the raft still swept onward at dangerous speed a worried look came over their faces. Steering the plunging raft with the heavy sweeps was killing work, and their overworked bodies were beginning to surrender to exhaustion, when, as luck would have it, they emerged into a long stretch of quiet water. The mountains had drawn back from the river, forming a circular valley, and through the peaceful spot the current moved gently.

"There's dry ground and dead spruces!" Shorty cried, as he pointed to a straight bank below them. "Let's land and build a fire!"

The boys needed no second invitation, and a half-hour later they had made a landing and were warming their chilled bodies before a cheerful blaze. While the water was heating they broiled some sheep-meat, and after the meal was finished they lay quietly about the fire. A lethargy that was new to the boys had crept over them, and they dreaded the thought of resuming their toil.

"Something's gone wrong with me," George said as he got up to replenish the fire. "When I

carried in that stick of dead spruce it felt as if it weighed a ton."

Fred, who was lying with his head on his folded arms, didn't move. "Same symptoms," he grunted, "I feel a million years old."

"What's up Shorty, is it the straight meat?" George asked.

"Surest thing you know!" Shorty answered. "I'm beginning to feel the same way. We're buckin' against what the dime novels call 'The devastatin' pangs o' hunger.'"

"But that can't be," George objected, "Because we've had enough to eat, right along."

"We've had enough, maybe, but outside o' the sheep Fred got, and a few ground-squirrels, we ain't had good meat since the ice went, and what's more we've been short o' store grub for a month back, and what we had was mouldy."

"Shorty's right, I guess, my legs feel sort of wabbly," Fred said hesitatingly. An embarrassed look crossed his honest face, and in an attempt to appear light-hearted, he continued, "I'd give a million dollars for a good big plate of hot-cakes, soused with real butter and maple syrup."

While Fred and Shorty talked, George watched

them narrowly. It was the first time that he had ever heard Fred complain, and as he studied his companions he noticed their sunken eyes and drawn faces. Hitherto, their weather-tanned skin had suggested strength and good health, but looking closely he could see that it was a bleached tan, that lacked the ruddy look that good blood would have given it. His heart sank as he realized that Fred was beginning to weaken, and for the first time he realized how much his companionship meant to him. His first impulse was to make Fred rest and eat a larger ration, but the next instant he dismissed the idea, knowing that Fred would spurn any plan that favoured him at the expense of the others. A moment's thought convinced him that there was only one way out of the difficulty. To think was to act, with George, and without wasting an instant he got to his feet and began to break camp.

"What are you doing?" "What's yer hurry?" Fred and Shorty objected from beside the warm flames, and George, smiling broadly to hide his real feelings, answered: "The battleship *Sourdough* is leaving for the sea-coast—I'm after that million dollars that Fred's been talking about!"

CHAPTER XIX

"BREAD UPON THE WATERS"

THIRTY minutes later the raft, with its freight of men and dogs, was drifting down the river. They had seen from their camp that the valley walls were drawing in, and so they were prepared for the swift water that they encountered. As they swept onward, however, their task grew more difficult. The sun had disappeared in a bank of dense clouds and they were soon wet through again from the cold spray that dashed over them. The current grew swifter and the walls drew closer together, until they realized that they were running a cañon without knowing where it would lead them. Usually cañons have straight walls which insure an ample depth of water, but to their dismay the gorge they had entered had broken walls, and they began to encounter great masses of driftwood that had lodged below the

cliffs during the preceding flood. Twice they struck such obstructions a glancing blow, but luck was with them and the raft rolled onward in a welter of foam.

Nothing daunted they held fast to their faith in the future, and when they entered a white swirl of water and saw the walls drawing apart before them they thought that their troubles were at an end. They had no time to rejoice, however, for in the next instant they heard a sullen roar ahead of them, and saw the river breaking over a dead spruce-tree that had lodged between some great boulders so that its gnarled trunk swept the waves. There was no time to speak, and scarcely enough to think, before the crash came. George gave the raft a wild glance in the hope of seeing something to which he could cling, but everything was lashed down, and as he felt the raft lurch under him he brought his sheath-knife across the rope that held Baldy, and leaped clear.

For a short time he was conscious of being swept downward by the freezing flood, he felt the impact of blows, too, but his mind was filled with the frantic struggle to reach the surface. His lungs were bursting for want of air, and he was growing

weaker, when he felt something strike him between the eyes and he knew no more.

When George came to he lay for a long time in a state of semi-consciousness. His first distinct feeling was one of petty impatience, for there was a familiar odour in his nostrils that he could not place. This gave way to a dull pain that came from the blow he had received in the water, and then his ears caught an unbelievable sound and he opened his eyes with wonder. At first he could see nothing, but his strength came back quickly and raising his head he saw that he was in an Indian tent. The effort weakened him and for a long time he lay quiet, his mind filled with a thousand questions. As his head cleared he heard the roar of the angry river, and then, in a flood of anguish, the memory of the accident came back to him. His first thoughts were of Fred and Shorty, and lurching to his hands and knees he struggled towards a shaft of light. For a moment he was blinded by the glare and the pain from his head, and then, as his vision cleared, he saw his companions seated before a fire around which some Indians were preparing their evening meal. But the greatest surprise of all was when a smiling,

brown face began to materialize out of the fire-smoke, and he saw Nabesna Charlie striding towards him.

The first night George was too weak to talk, and Fred and Shorty, after giving him some food, rolled him in a rabbit-skin robe that they had borrowed from an Indian and told him to sleep. But in the days that followed his strength came back, and as they worked on the new raft that was to carry them to the sea, or mended their ragged clothes with sinew that the squaws gave them, he heard every detail of their miraculous escape.

"When the old *Sourdough* hit the log, she split in two," Shorty explained. "By a streak o' good luck Fred and me hung on to a part o' the raft, and after we'd been ducked and banged around pretty lively we drifted into good water. As soon as we'd got the river out of our eyes we saw the Injun camp, and after we'd hollered fer awhile some young bucks came out with Nabesna Charlie and scooped us in."

"We hadn't seen you up to that time," Fred added. "We thought you were a goner, but a young buck named Shilligan pulled you out of the main

current—you were hanging to one of the sweeps like grim death—he had to pry you loose."

There was one thing that they would have been glad to forget—the dogs had disappeared with their outfit. Although they mourned the death of the Indian huskies, it was the loss of Baldy that hit them the hardest. For two years the faithful dog had shared the hardships of their rough life, and the boys had learned to regard him as a true friend and companion.

"I tried my best to cut him loose before the smash came, but maybe he got hit, like I did," George explained sadly, and so sincere was their sorrow that they could not bear to mention him again.

But George was to learn that in this life good fortune is equally distributed with bad. The first piece of good fortune came when he recovered his rifle; an Indian boy had found it firmly lashed to a piece of the broken raft, and without saying a word had tossed it into their tent.

The second happened by the evening fire. As they had to have food to carry them to the sea, they had called a council of the older Indians to decide on the amount that they would be allowed

to take. These Shorty addressed by the light of the flames. First he thanked them for their rescue and hospitality, and as he finished the plea for food, he told them that as soon as they could procure money they would deposit a liberal amount to Nabesna Charlie's order at the A. C. Company's store at Tokanuska Landing.

For a long time the Indians sat silently watching the flames, and then Nabesna Charlie spoke.

"Money good, but skins hy-iu good. You ketchum tenas grub, me ketchum tenas skins."

For an instant the white men could not believe their ears. They were penniless, their winter's fur catch had been swept away in the flood, and yet the Indian that they had befriended demanded fur in payment. They were on the point of showing their resentment when Shorty rose to his feet.

"Nabesna Charlie," he began, "you savvy me no ketchum skins. You savvy skookum[1] water ketchum."

"Angh." The Indian assented calmly. "Me savvy. Skookum water ketchum skins, me ketchum skins. Skins sit down nika *cache*—long taime."

[1] Chinook for strong.

Turning, he called a guttural order through the outer blackness. It was followed by the grating of a log-ladder on a nearby *cache*, and a squaw dropped a great canvas roll in the circle of fire-light. As she returned for more, Nabesna Charlie's knife flicked across the lashing, and a cascade of skins that gleamed like gold burst from the covering.

In an instant the boys were beside the pile of fur, and George was holding a wolverine pelt to the light of the flames. The left forefoot was gone at the joint, and as his trembling fingers searched through the thick fur behind the ears they felt two holes where a 30–40 bullet had passed through. Slowly he turned to Fred, whose eyes were alight with a silent hope. "It's him," he said gravely. "It's the wolverine that robbed our traps in 'The Happy Hunting Ground.'"

In their blankets that night they marvelled at the strangeness of human nature.

"But why didn't he tell us that he'd found our fur?" Fred asked for the tenth time.

"You can search *me!*" George answered. "The funniest part of the business is that he acted as if he thought that we knew everything."

Shorty, who had been listening, grinned, and shook his head hopelessly. "It's just Injun contrariness," he complained. "And I'll tell you somethin' else," he added earnestly; "I'm goin' to quit tryin' to savvy Injuns. After this I'm agoin' to figure on 'em bein' human, and let it go at that."

Before they fell asleep they had almost regained their usual good spirits, for they were in a position to repay the Indians for their kindness, and George's last thought before he lost consciousness was that with Baldy safe and sound again, he could start for the sea with a light heart.

As the last Indian rolled into his blankets, and the camp grew silent, the wolf-like Indian dogs broke into their weird howls, and then advancing cautiously to the dying fires they curled up and slept. An hour later a second burst of wolf-music broke the silence, and a mass of slinking forms rushed to the outskirts of the camp, but their anger died away in snarls and bickerings, and again the silence closed down. Then from the entrance of the white-men's tent came the patter of tired feet, and George grunted contentedly in his sleep as the warmth of a familiar form

snuggled against his back. When they awoke six hours later it was to find Baldy, tired and bedraggled, but whining with pent-up happiness—keeping guard over his young masters at the tent door.

CHAPTER XX

THE DEAD COTTONWOOD

EARLY the following morning the Indians departed. The water had fallen enough to enable them to pole and paddle their light canoes to their summer hunting-grounds. The boys and Shorty were interested spectators of the bustle and excitement that marked the leave-taking, but when the last canoe had passed from view they felt deserted and alone. This was a natural reaction after their long winter in the wilderness, but it soon passed when they began to busy themselves with the problems of their own departure.

The Indians had burned up all the good wood near the camp, and as they still needed two stout sweeps Fred and Shorty went in search of some straight spruce-trees. George began the loading of the raft, and as their entire outfit consisted of

a few odds and ends that the Indians had given them, it did not take long. Their shelter was a strip of canvas; three battered tin plates, a frying-pan without a handle, and a small lard-can represented their cooking utensils, while two badly worn marmot-skin robes was all that they had to cover them at night.

Baldy had refused to leave the camp with Fred and Shorty and as George moved about, the faithful dog followed him like a shadow. If George sat down for a moment Baldy would snuggle down beside him, if he started to fold up a piece of canvas the old dog would dance about and get in his way in an effort to be useful, and when George had time to give him a playful mauling he was beside himself with pure happiness. Once, when George was patting Baldy's head he felt a suspicious swelling near the old dog's nose, and a brief examination disclosed the fact that it was caused by an embedded porcupine quill.

"Oho! you old rascal," George laughed, "now I know how you managed to live while you were away from us."

It required five minutes of cutting with a sharp skinning-knife to extract the quill, and not once

through the trying ordeal did Baldy show the slightest impatience.

But while George had been moving busily about the camp, his mind was filled with conflicting emotions. He could not forget that this was the end of the mission on which Dan Draper had sent them, and he could not forget that they had failed. The fact that they had crossed snow-bound ranges, fought their way through a blizzard-lashed wilderness, and suffered almost every hardship, meant nothing—it was a part of the day's work. The truth of the matter was that they had been sent to find a certain dead cottonwood below a certain cañon, and they had failed. When he had admitted the fact, a wave of resentment swept over him, and he looked at the wilderness about him with rebellious eyes. In fact he had just cause for resentment for in that rugged landscape every gully might be truthfully called a cañon, and dead cottonwood trees stood in every valley.

"It would be like finding a needle in a haystack," he said aloud. "This camp might be the place. It's just below a cañon, and I'll bet there were cottonwood trees here before the

Indians began to use it." As he ceased speaking he gave an involuntary start for he remembered that the fire in the centre of the Indian village was built against the trunk of a fallen cottonwood tree. Smiling incredulously at the idea he walked towards the fire, but as the charred trunk of the tree came into view his face grew serious again, for in a little thicket behind the fire stood the tree's weather-beaten stump.

A few steps brought him to the stump and he saw that the hollow centre was filled with bits of dead wood, and scraps of hide or canvas that the Indians had discarded. As he began to remove the débris he cast a guilty look at the surrounding hills for he did not want to have Fred or Shorty surprise him in such a foolish undertaking. His companions were not yet in sight, however, so he devoted all his energies to cleaning out the cavity. To complete the task he was forced to use a short stick, for the hole was quite deep, and he had scarcely begun to rake up the chips and dust that remained when the stick struck a hard substance. For an instant his heart almost stopped beating, but the next instant he realized that there were boulders lying all about him, and his excitement

passed. As he felt again more carefully he found that he could move the hard object, and when he had raked it into the centre of the hollow he forced his head and shoulders into the hole and lifted it out.

At first he did not look closely at the rock as his eyes were partly blinded by the dust and charcoal that his clothes had dislodged, but as soon as he could see clearly he picked it up, and the next instant he was dashing madly out of the thicket. On reaching the fire he grabbed up a piece of sacking and scrubbed the rock violently, and when he looked at it again he jumped to his feet and sent a wild, triumphant yell across the surrounding hills.

His yell was answered almost instantly, and five minutes later the three toil-worn figures were sitting in a dazed circle around a piece of brownish quartz, that, by the gold that gleamed from its rough surfaces, they recognized as Lucky Simpson's find.

One week later they were camped in a circular valley that lay between two cañons some ten miles above the Indian camp. Foot by foot they had traced the quartz deposit by the *float* that

they found on the bank of the river. It had taken them some time to learn to recognize the different variations of the rock, for they seldom found pieces that bore any outward indications of the precious metal, but whenever they crushed a sample and washed it in their battered frying-pan they were always rewarded with a heavy deposit of gold.

"It's come down to this," Shorty said as they sat by their evening fire. "We've found the quartz and it's richer'n any rock I've seen in Alaska. What's more, we kin find the place where it come from if we have to hike fer the sea-coast to git grub, and hunt fer it later. So the proposition pans down to this: if the ledge that this rock floated from is big, we'll have somethin' worth hangin' onto, and if they ever lay a railroad up the Tokanuska—we'll have money to throw at the Dicky birds!"

In the days that followed it seemed as if Dame Fortune had a perpetual smile on her face. When their food began to give out and they faced a retreat to the sea, George found a young moose in a narrow valley and dispatched him with one shot. Then with heavy food-packs they took

up the trail again. But search as they would they could find no float in the river bank above the circular valley. Shorty would not give up until he was certain that they had made no mistake, and then he said, "If Lucky Simpson's rock didn't come down the river, it must have come from the walls o' this here valley."

Now the valley was drained by a rushing stream that came from the snow-fields far above. When it reached the valley it spread out into a chain of ponds that had been formed by a colony of beavers in days gone by, and it entered the main river through marshy banks where no rocks of any kind could be seen. They talked the matter over around their lunch fire, and decided unanimously that if the vein they were looking for was situated in the walls of the valley, they would find some of the float in the upper portion of the stream. After they had washed down a good meal of moose meat with some of the rank tea that they had gotten from the Indians, they skirted the beaver-ponds on their way to the head of the valley.

In all their wilderness travel they had never seen so beautiful a spot.

The little lakes reflected every detail of the steep

mountain-sides that encircled them, and between, stretched meadows of young grass, that, despite the treacherous muskegs that lay beneath, looked as firm and smooth as a New England pasture. The meadows were banked with solid walls of spruce against which the white trunks of the birches made a silvery pattern. As they tramped along, flocks of mallards and teal rose from the marshy banks, and quiet rings on the glassy water told them that the trout were feeding. It would be impossible for one who had not spent a winter in the Northland to appreciate the delight with which the boys regarded the beautiful valley. Even Shorty was noticeably impressed, and as they left the lakes behind and entered the timber he turned for a last look, and said, "I've lived so many years in the open, boys, that I can't remember the time when I couldn't carry a pack and swing a axe, and I'm givin' it to you straight when I say that I've never seen a valley that could touch this here one."

The boys were equally enthusiastic, but the sound of rushing water soon reminded them of their mission, and entering the dense timber they pushed on towards the stream. Soon they could

see the gleam of foam through the trees, and then, as they came out on the river bank, their eyes gleamed and their faces blanched with excitement — for scattered everywhere were fragments of the rusty-coloured rock that they were seeking.

"We've got it, boys, we've got it!" Shorty muttered thickly, and George and Fred forgot their own excitement as they watched him. It was the first time since they had known him that he had shown any strong emotion; through hunger and hardship, through the hours when the glacier-formed lake had burst its bonds, and during the moments when their raft was battered to pieces in the rapid, Shorty had never lost his humorous, happy-go-lucky attitude towards life, but now his self-control was gone and his hand trembled as he fumbled at the scabbard of his hatchet.

At last the flap came loose, and picking up a piece of the red quartz Shorty struck it a sharp blow with the back of the hatchet. The rock broke easily, and as they studied the fresh break they could see tiny specks of gold. To make sure Shorty wet the sample and tested the gold with the point of his knife, and then a faint suggestion

of the familiar grin crossed his face, as he said, "It's Lucky Simpson's quartz—unless I'm dreamin'. Hit me with a rock or somethin' fellers, so I'll know I ain't asleep!"

Slowly they worked their way up the stream, and it seemed as if the quantity of the precious rock increased at every step. At last they saw a fork ahead of them and Shorty said, "now we'll find which branch of the crick our mine is located on." Stumbling among the rocks, and splashing through the water they hurried towards the fork. As they approached it, Shorty, who had taken to the opposite bank, shouted, "you follow the left branch, boys, and I'll follow the right, and then we can meet here and compare notes."

A moment later the boys were alone, and as they followed their tributary towards the south side of the valley they saw that they were still on the trail of the red quartz. As they did not want to go on without Shorty they held a hurried consultation and decided to return.

"As soon as he finds that there is no quartz on his creek, he'll hurry back," Fred said, as they tramped along.

"There he is now!" George exclaimed a minute

later, and as Fred looked up he saw Shorty hurrying towards them.

"Come on back, it's up my crick." He shouted when they had come within hearing.

"That may be, but it's up our creek too," Fred answered.

Shorty did not reply. He was staring beyond them with a blank expression, at the walls of the valley, and as they wheeled to follow his gaze, he found his voice, and cried, "We've got it! we've got it! Great jumpin' rattle-snakes! Look at that dyke o' quartz!"

At first the boys could see nothing unusual, but when Shorty had recovered his breath he pointed out a broad, brownish stain that swept downward across the walls of the valley. "It's the biggest piece o' quartz I ever see," Shorty gasped, as his eagle eyes searched the mountain-side. "It's so big it's got me plum skeered to death!"

Now the boys had had no experience in prospecting for quartz, but they had helped Dan Draper find the placer claims on the Kachiltna headwaters during the preceding summer. As they recalled that wonderful experience when they actually

picked up golden nuggets from the cracks in the exposed bed-rock, they could not help feeling disappointed in this mountain of rusty-coloured rock. Shorty was quick to notice their lack of enthusiasm, and for a moment his feelings were hurt.

"What's the matter with you fellers?" he said irritably. "Here you be, lookin' at what promises to be the dangdest, all-firedest big lode o' quartz in Alaska, and yer act as if ye'd set down on a porcupine!"

"That's the whole trouble, Shorty," Fred answered, dubiously, "we'd like to take your word for it, but when we found the Golden Valley we could *see* the gold lying on the rocks, and——"

"Huh!" Shorty snorted. "The trouble with you fellers is that you've had a heap o' luck. Why I knows bunches o' prospectors that've been millin' around in the tall timber fer ten years without findin' 'nough gold to fill a tooth." As Shorty talked he led the way up the creek, followed by the repentant boys. Now and then he would stop to look at a piece of float, and during one of these halts George said, "How rich do you think this mine will be?" and Fred added, "Do you think it'll run as big as the Golden Valley?"

Shorty deliberated for some time and then he spoke slowly, and quietly: "If the Golden Valley was to turn out as good as I hope it will, and if this here lode only turns out one half as good as I think she will, I wouldn't sell out my interest for five Golden Valleys!"

With his keen eyes fixed on their faces he waited until he saw that they had caught the full significance of his words, and then with a satisfied grin, he turned and clambered upward towards the cliffs.

CHAPTER XXI

THE END OF THE LONG TRAIL

IN the days that followed they prepared for the future under Shorty's skilful guidance. By day they clambered among the cliffs tracing the body of ore; they explored gullies where they feared to talk, so finely balanced were the tons of loose rocks that hung above them; they clung with bleeding hands to slippery slopes that shone with the spray of waterfalls; they staked a mill-site at the valley's head, and, still tracing their find to the barren uplands, they marked its confines with solid cairns against the strength of summer snow-squalls.

When their moose meat was nearly gone a band of white goats came to the cliffs, and the leader, a great beast with short, black horns, fell before George's battered rifle. They made a drying-rack, and at night the boys smoked the

meat while Shorty studied their claim locations, or talked of the golden future.

"Remember this here valley well, boys, for after the railroad's built up the Tokanuska it won't be worth lookin' at," he would say as they looked out across the still water from their rough camp. "Instead of the quiet there'll be the roar o' stamp-mills; in place o' this clear water there'll be mud, an' tailings; these green medders'll be filled in with gravel, an' over yonder where them spruces stand so thick an' nice there'll be rows o' onery shacks for the miners."

In time, the coming of the railroad became an obsession to Shorty, for the working of the big lode would demand vast quantities of machinery and supplies, and almost everything he spoke—or thought of, had to do with the coming of the steel rails.

Through it all they grew more gaunt and ragged, for their sewing kits had been lost in the flood, and their sinewy bodies showed through the rents that they could not mend. Their shoes had gone and their feet were beginning to protrude from the moccasins that the Indians had given them, while their untrimmed hair hung down below their gaunt

A BAND OF WHITE GOATS CAME TO THE CLIFFS.

faces. Looking at each other they realized that they had reached the end of their strength, the time to retreat had come. On this occasion, however, the decision brought no heart-aches, for out of the untrammelled wilderness they had won success from failure, and though they had paid for it in blood and suffering they had not balked at the price.

It was about two weeks later that wonderful news came to Tokanuska Landing. After months of uncertainty and suspense the United States Government had decided to build a railroad into the Alaskan interior, and from all the routes offered, the Railroad Commission had chosen that of the Tokanuska Valley. The steamer bearing the first contingent of engineers would arrive in about a week, and in the meantime the citizens of Tokanuska Landing gave themselves over to a wild celebration. How the news was borne remains a mystery, but in two days the surrounding wilderness began to pour forth men, until the streets were jammed with a dense mass of good-natured frontiersmen. Dan Finch, the Alaska Trading Company's representative made flowery

speeches that began with "Friends, and fellow citizens," and ended with, "Tokanuska's on the map!"

The crowd cheered him to the echo, and later, when two huskies began to fight, they were cheered just as lustily. The crowd was in a gay mood and ready to welcome anything in the way of excitement. This desire was soon met in an unexpected way. A keen-eyed Indian boy by the river bank raised his voice in a shrill cry of "B-o-a-t!"

In an instant there was a stampede to the water front, for no other cry can call out the entire population of an Alaskan coast town with more celerity. As the eager men gathered on the wharf their eyes were turned towards the mouth of the river in expectation of sighting the steamer that carried the railroad builders, and the disappointment was general when it was found that the excitement had been caused by a battered raft carrying three men and a famished dog, that was just rounding a wooded point above the town. But as the details of the raft grew clear, the interest of the crowd returned, for it was plain that the strange party bore all the outward signs

of having overcome many hardships and adventures. In an instant the crowd was on tip-toe with curiosity. Cries of, "They're sour-doughs from the interior!" and, "They'll bring news from the Tokanuska headwaters!" echoed along the river bank, and there was a pushing and shoving in the dense throng to reach the spot where the party would land.

As the strangers came within earshot they were deluged with questions concerning the place they haled from, the regions they had traversed, and the length of time they had been on the trail. These, the men on the raft answered as best they could, and the oldest of the three, a short, powerfully built man, called out, "What's the excitement? Circus come to town?"

A roar of laughter answered his sally, and as it died down, a proud Tokanuskan answered, "Not on yer life! It's the Tokanuska and Northern Railroad!"

For a moment the men on the raft stood as if carved from stone, and then they grasped the wonderful news and broke into ecstatic cheers. Their enthusiasm was contagious, and the crowd joined in as the raft drifted gently to the shore.

Now the crowd was composed largely of prospectors, and as the three tattered figures stepped onto dry land, a grizzled old miner gave the two youngest members of the party an astonished stare, and exclaimed: "Well I'll be hanged if it ain't the two Draper kids!"

Practically every man in the crowd either knew Dan Draper and the boys, or had heard of their discovery of the Golden Valley, and Shorty, too was soon recognized. Their landing, in consequence, became a triumph, and in an instant their entire outfit had been swung onto willing shoulders and the crowd fell back forming a lane through which they walked to the Alaska Trading Company's store.

After Dan Finch had cleared a circle, they went about the disposal of their winter's fur catch. While Shorty untied the canvas covers, the boys arranged the skins according to species, and although the crowd contained many expert trappers, a murmur of astonishment arose at the size and beauty of the display. There were masses of glossy marten skins, snow-white ermine, golden mink and otter, tawny lynx, red- and cross-fox, wolverine, and shaggy wolf skins, and,

to crown the whole, two silver-grey fox skins, that in themselves represented a year's grub-stake.

The onlookers waited breathlessly while Finch carefully appraised the skins, and when he spoke a murmur of interest arose, for the offer was the highest price ever paid by the Company for a single catch. For a minute the boys and Shorty conversed in whispers, and then George turned to him and said, "We are satisfied. Five hundred dollars goes to the credit of Nabesna Charlie. We'll take two hundred on account, and the balance when the next steamer sails for Kanuk."

As George finished a hush of astonishment settled over the crowd, and a mail-carrier from the Eagle Trail pulled Shorty's sleeve, and gasped, "Say! That young feller must be crazy! Be yer goin' to saw off five hundred iron dollars onto a Injun?"

A glint of amusement shone in Shorty's eyes, and he replied: "Surest thing yer know! If it hadn't o' been for that Injun, them skins and the three o' us would be on the bottom o' the Tokanuska."

The clink of silver from a heavy sack that Finch deposited on the counter ended their first fur

venture, and elbowing their way with difficulty through the friendly throng, they started towards the Recording Office. It was but a moment before those nearest to them sensed their intent, for in things pertaining to gold the Alaskan has an intuition that is uncanny. The Recording Office was in a small log building some distance down the street and before they had gone half-way they were halted by the denseness of the throng. The men nearest to them were calling, "Show us yer dust!" "Where did yer strike it?" and other questions that were lost in the din. A tall prospector next to George kept repeating in a hoarse whisper, "I know Dan Draper. Tell me what creek yer on and I'll split all I find with yer."

It was at this point that Shorty had a bright idea. Forcing the claim locations into George's hand, he worked his way to the outskirts of the crowd, and as soon as he was free he drew Lucky Simpson's great nugget from his shirt, and held it aloft. In an instant the crowd had surrounded him, and, sure of his men, Shorty let the precious rock pass freely from hand to hand, while George and Fred had no trouble in reaching the Recording Office and recording their claims.

Thus ended their triumph. The knowledge that there was high-grade gold ore on the line of the railroad, started a stampede, and the boys and "Shorty" were beseiged by scores of eager men who were leaving for the upper river. These they treated justly, knowing the hardships that awaited them.

Four days later, the long-awaited steamer arrived. Hot water and soap, good food, and new clothes had worked wonders with our three gold-seekers, and as they swung down the street to board the steamer for Kanuk, they were as husky a trio as Alaska could produce. The government engineers had already settled themselves in the best hotel that the town could boast, and one of them, a young man strange to Alaskan ways, met the boys and Shorty as they reached the steamer landing.

"I-er—I hear that you men have had experience along the Tokanuska," the young man began, "and I'll be glad to hire you at the regular wages."

George and Fred thanked him and passed on, but Shorty couldn't resist enlightening him.

"We don't work for wages, young feller," he

said with lofty condescension, "we're mine owners and sour-doughs—and now that I happen to think o' it —you're one o' the fellers that's workin' fer us!"

The young man stared in amazement until the three had passed from view, and as he turned towards the hotel, he murmured, "My! But these Alaskans are a strange lot!" A moment later he halted again, and said with a perplexed look, "I wonder what the man meant when he said that *I* was working for *him!*"

A half-hour later the steamer dropped down the river and headed northward, towards Kanuk. The boys and Shorty stood by the stern watching Tokanuska Landing fade away into the distance. As they drew away from the coast the inland ranges began to appear above the forested foothills, and as their eyes roamed from one snow-capped peak to another, their thoughts followed their eyes far back among the unnamed mountains. Most of the nearer peaks were strange to them, but off to the north-eastward, and so far away that it was barely visible against the evening sky, ran a pale blue line that marked the ice-clad summits of the Kachiltnas. As they watched

the slowly fading outline of the mighty range, each of them was stirred by a separate flood of memories. Shorty was thinking of a battered shovel that marked a grave in the living ice; Fred was glad with an honest pride in a task well done, while George was yearning for the day when his snow-shoes would break a new trail into the land of "The White Blanket."

THE END

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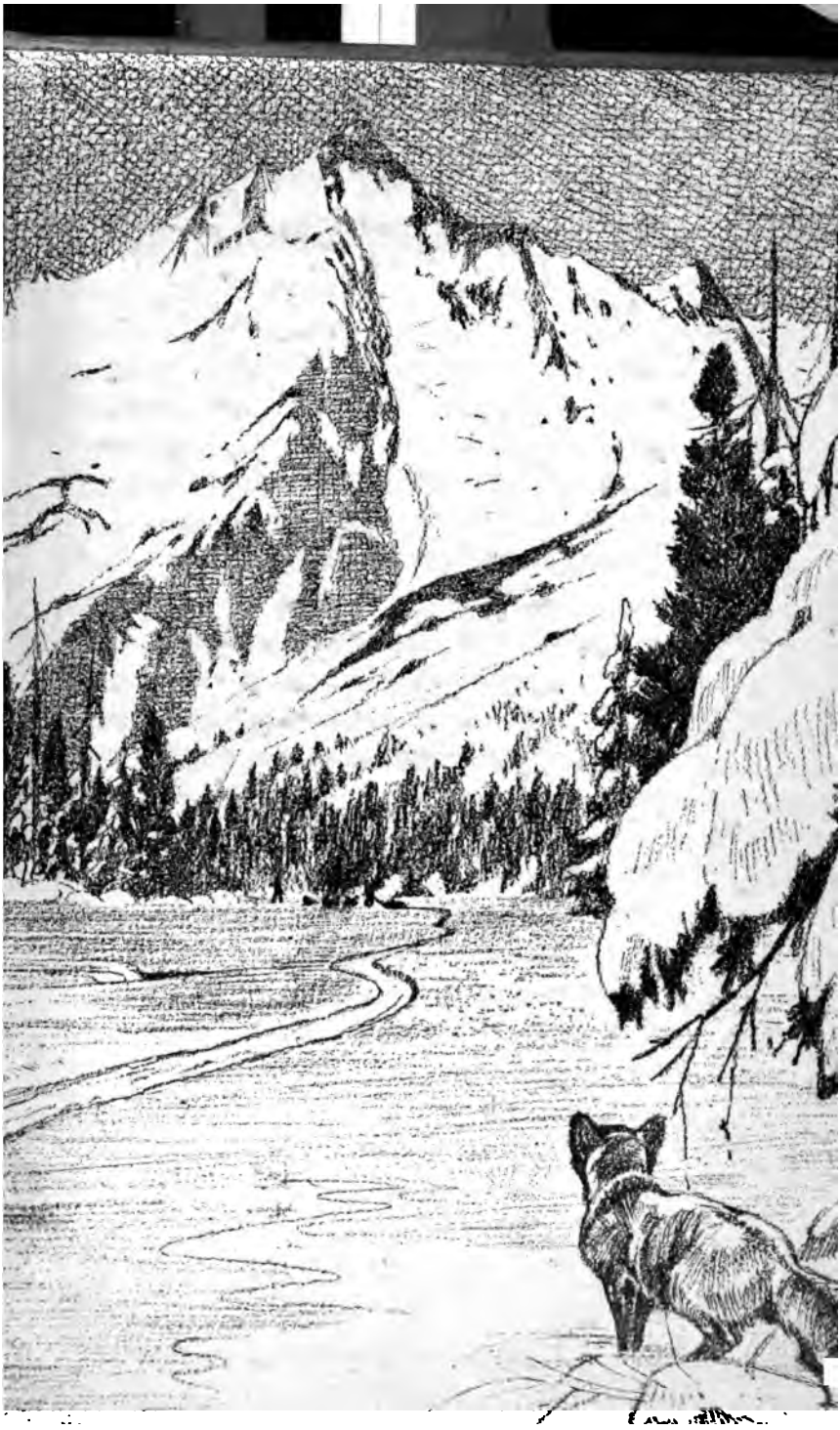
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